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by

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CHAPTER ONE

THE house opposite, in the centre of the Terrace, was clean gone. It was a neat job, but not a pleasant one, like a front tooth gone from the upper set. Nothing at all seemed to have happened to their own house, excepting for that broken window on the first floor, which looked as if a cricket ball might have done it. But it probably wasn't a cricket ball.

He rang the ground-floor bell, where a small brass plaque announced his mother's name: Mrs. Frederick Mather. He rang several times, but there was no reply.

"I suppose she's got a war-job, too, like everybody else," thought Danny Mather. "She can't have got my wire." He descended the area steps where the caretakers, the O'Connors, lived. He clutched an attaché-case in his left hand, a disreputable affair. It looked as if it had been left out in the rain, or soaked in sea-water, a good many times, and then had come back for more. The metal clasps and hinges were mottled green, and the edges were not edges any longer, they were billowy, like cushions. The thing looked quite out of accord with the trim suit and hat the young man wore, but he clutched it so tight you might have thought it was a small child's hand. Down there in the area he tugged at a hand-bell, which rang out loudly; but that, too, produced no result. Still clutching his bag he went up to the front door again. He did not want to lose that bag. It was all he had left, after all, of half a lifetime, of a wife and son, of a world of friends and interests, a house, a garden, the beaten silver, the rare butterflies, the etchings, the hibiscus by the small pool, a wife and son, a wife and son. . . .

Helen, Edward. The little crease deepened on the side of his mouth. He looked round right and left along Southwick Crescent to the four corners, as if they might at any moment turn up from any direction, any of the four corners of the round earth. He turned his eyes to the door again. Harris, Goulden, Travers. He pressed the remaining three bells. There was no one, it seemed, in the whole house. It occurred to him that the street had, perhaps, been evacuated, because of some unexploded time-bomb. But no. The street would be railed off, wouldn't it? And there were no evidences of recent blitz, either. He observed they had made a pretty satisfactory water-tank of the place where the house opposite had stood. No, there was no unexploded time-bomb in Southwick Crescent. A small boy came pedalling up on a bicycle, whistling cheerfully, and fanning his arms on either side, like a tight-rope walker. A tear suddenly jumped full-orbed into the corner of Danny's eye. He shook his head and flung it from him, as if it were some noxious insect.

"This is too idiotic, Danny!" he told himself harshly. "Por

God's sake, control yourself!" He descended the front steps again, feeling appallingly lost and lonely. He had not felt so lost, so good and lost, since the time he had come adrift from the bunch of Aussies in the Malayan jungle below the Muar River. He had felt lost enough, but not lonely. There had been company enough, and that didn't mean the leeches, and the mosquitoes, or the spiders, or the snakes. It meant the Japs, their sweet faces like the boles of trees, spattered over with a skein of leaves. Or the ghosts of Japs. The ghosts of Leicestershires, East Surreys, Sikhs, Aussies. Ghosts, ghosts. Lost in the jungle, Danny, but not a bit lonely.

He hesitated a moment on the last step. He couldn't get the words out of his mind, singly, or in their collocation. Lost, lonely. Lost, lonely. Lost in the Malayan jungle, but not lonely. In the East Indian sea, lost *and* lonely. Those were the days in the open boat, peeling, sweltering. Even there he was not lonely in the sense that he was alone. Yet how terribly alone he had been, despite Jarvis, and Milligan, and Higgins, and Irwin, who had been in the boat, too.

Or could you say Milligan had been in the boat, Milligan dead as a dog run over by a heavy truck? And no one had had the strength to throw a dog overboard, much less Milligan, who had been a pretty hefty fellow, six foot two in his stockings. As for Jarvis and Higgins, he could have sworn half a dozen times they had passed out. But they hadn't. A spark still smouldered, under the heaps they were of sodden wreckage, rotted, and caked with brine.

"Excuse me, can I help you?" A woman's face and voice broke in on the glitter and dazzle of waves and the pipe of sea-birds. "I'm Mrs. Wingate. The air-raid warden," she added a trifle apologetically. For, of course, the stranger wasn't an incendiary bomb, really, and in that sense didn't come under her jurisdiction. But the poor fellow looked so lost somehow, so lonely. Then suddenly she recognized him. Wasn't this Danny, the son of Mrs. Mather? He had left for Malaya only a month or so after she had come to live in Southwick Terrace, in the summer of 1939. As far as she remembered, she had never actually spoken to him; or to his wife, for that matter, who had followed him to Malaya a couple of months later, taking their small boy along, too. It was the small boy it was impossible to forget, a grand little fellow, with those forget-me-not eyes, and that spun-gold hair, yet as tough as they make them. He had lighted up the whole terrace, like a window-box with daffodils, and the sun on them.

"You're the son of Mrs. Mather, aren't you?" she asked. She was certain he was, though he looked so much older than when he left, a good ten years older. And the cheekbones were sticking out like doorknobs. He looked pretty ill. Poor boy! Malaya! He must have been through something! His mother couldn't possibly have known he was due to arrive that morning, or she wouldn't have gone running off to Westerleigh. Or at all events

she would have requested someone to keep an eye open for him.

"Yes, I'm Danny Mather," he told her. "How do you do?" It's nice, Mrs. Wingate thought, the way wars and things don't upset the manners of our men. She liked good manners. Her trim hat and coat and skirt were in themselves quite an exercise in good manners, of the pre-utility era, perhaps.

"So you're all right. That's splendid."

"Oh, yes, I'm all right." His lips twisted a little wryly. She didn't notice it.

"That's splendid," she said again. "Your mother will be *so* relieved. She hadn't heard for ages. Not since . . . I think it was Colombo she said. No, it was Bombay, wasn't it?"

"Bombay?" he bit his lips. "I gave that fellow a pound to wire from Jerusalem for me. Damn the man! I should have looked after it myself . . . but I was . . . a bit groggy. I sent a wire this morning from Poole, she doesn't seem to have got it."

"I suppose the boy pushed it under the door," Mrs. Wingate suggested. "Would you like me to get a key——"

"Excuse me," he interrupted. "You don't happen to know if any word has come through from my wife . . . or about my boy?" He did not raise his eyes from the ground. He might have been asking whether a local bus-service was still running.

Mrs. Wingate paused. The answer was no, or at least the answer had been no until a couple of days ago, when she had last exchanged more than a word or two with Mrs. Mather. If word had come from any quarter since then she was pretty sure Mrs. Mather would have let her know about it.

"I know your mother's been after the Colonial Office daily," Mrs. Wingate said quietly. "No, I don't think word has come through yet. I'm . . . so awfully sorry."

"You've not seen her for a couple of days," Danny insisted.

"No. But I think——"

"How is my mother?" he interrupted. "Is she all right? Do you happen to know where she is?"

"Yes, she's quite well," Mrs. Wingate said. "Though that's a bit of a miracle." She nodded significantly towards the hunk of nothing where the house opposite had been before the bomb exploded in it.

"She was at home when it happened?" he asked. "Was it fairly recent? I didn't hear a word about it. She's all right, is she?"

"Nobody was hurt except those poor people there," Mrs. Wingate told him. She sighed, a little briskly.

"Yes," he said. The woes of the poor people opposite cut no ice with him at all. He felt vaguely ashamed of himself, but that's how it was. The thought of a dozen smashed bodies, or a few less, or a few more, didn't impress him any more. He had seen too many

bodies in odd postures and conditions during that Malayan business, in the city streets, in the rubber estates, in the jungle, in hospital, or bobbing and bloated in the winking sea. "Has she taken on a job?" he asked. "Do you think I could get in touch with her?"

"As a matter of fact she has got a job. She's working with an architect, in Cavendish Square, I think—his secretary and odd-job man. She sometimes goes to the country with him for a day or two, but she's not with him to-day. She told me. I like people to let me know when they're not going to be around."

"Where is she then?" There was a note of impatience in his voice. His nerves were not at their best.

Her eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. Then: Poor fellow, she thought. He's all on edge. I don't wonder.

"She said something about a funeral," she told him. "Down in Westerleigh, I think she said. Oh, yes, and in case the doctor wanted to get in touch with her, the address was The Hazels. She left quite early."

"The Hazels! Good Lord! I suppose old Aunt Bertha's dead! Poor old girl!" He tried to put a seemly note of melancholy into his voice, but it didn't come off. He felt his heart as dry and hard inside him as a lump of pumice-stone. He didn't care a damn if Aunt Bertha was dead, lying like a fat wax candle in a box. Or any of the aunts if it came to that. (He had aunts in the remotest corners of the kindgom. Aunt Lavinia, with the brood of daughters. Where was she? Darlington? Aunt Mona, with the dreadful little titter, last heard of in Exeter. And above all Aunt Susan, damn her eyes! The old war-horse. Eighty years old if she was a day, and as likely to kick the bucket as Beachy Head! God Almighty, what a regiment of women!)

"Well, I've damn well got to go down to Westerleigh," he thought. "Yes, I know, I know." He was arguing with himself. His orders at Jerusalem had been, the moment he arrived in London, to get himself into the hands of the best man available on tropical diseases. "Well, the medicine-man can wait a day or two. I'll last a bit longer. I've got to go to Westerleigh." He didn't like the idea at all, but he knew he ought to do it. If Aunt Bertha had passed out, as she obviously had, it was his job to go and give his mother a hand. She was the only relative more or less on the spot. The other sisters and the gang of nieces were scattered about all over the country. Quite apart from the fact that they were all probably doing some job or other, it was such an awful business travelling about, it was most unlikely any of them had hopped down to Westerleigh.

Besides, his mother might have heard something about Helen during the last day or two. This Wingate woman said the subject hadn't come up for quite that time. Why, there even might be news waiting for him that very moment in Whitehall, while he stood about chewing the rag. He turned sharply and ran up a couple of steps,

then he stopped. No one was in, of course. He'd have to telephone from somewhere else.

"Excuse me," he said awkwardly. "If I could use your telephone . . . ."

"Certainly. I could give you a cup of tea, too. It would do you good."

"Thank you," he breathed. "Awfully kind." But he did not quite seem to know what he was saying. His mind and his eyes were away somewhere, far off. Half a minute passed, a minute.

"You wanted to telephone," she said at length, placing her hand on his shoulder.

"Excuse me. Oh, how rude of me!" He was profuse in his apologies. He looked round helplessly.

"My bag," he said. Then he realized that, of course, he still held it clutched in his hand. "I'm sorry," he added with a pale smile. "I'd hate to lose it. It's come a long way."

"Yes." She had an idea of what he had lost, but it seemed inept to offer sympathy. "I live at the corner there."

She opened the door with her key and let him into a sitting-room beyond a pleasant white-panelled hallway. The sitting-room, too, was pleasant, well-carpeted, with attractive pictures on the walls, and easy chairs that made you feel rested even to look at them. The place might have been a station waiting-room for all the impact it seemed to have on Danny Mather.

"Won't you sit down?" she said.

"Yes, yes." His hand was making gestures upon the air, as if it sought for something the nature of which for the moment eluded him.

"I have an electric kettle here," she told him, "just for emergencies." She plugged it in. "Now, I'll ring up Whitehall. It can be quite a complicated business, you know."

He sat down. "You're awfully kind," he murmured. "Really, you are. Thank you." She had pushed a box of cigarettes towards him.

"Please," she requested him. "Won't you put your bag down? You've become awfully attached to it, haven't you?"

"I'm sorry," he said, and set it down between his feet. "You see, Helen—that's my wife—bought it for me one birthday: she'd gone shopping at Robinsons, so . . . I'm rather keen on it now, of course."

"Of course," Mrs. Wingate echoed.

"And when I persuaded her to leave Kuala Lumpur with Edward—that's where I was stationed. . . ."

"Yes?"

"—I packed a few things in that bag; you know, just a few spares . . . a razor, pyjamas, toothbrush, *you* know. . . ."

Mrs. Wingate's lips formed the sound yes, but did not utter it.

"—the idea being that I'd have a refit of the essentials, at least, when I got to Singapore. At the last moment I threw in a little photograph-case with both their photos in. It's here now."

He was silent for some time. She said and did nothing. She sat waiting.

"The bag turned up in Singapore. I found it at Raffles Hotel when I inquired for her. I don't know who brought it along. I had the name and the address on the tag here. Do you see?" He pointed it out. There was practically nothing of the tag left but the string and a little mush of paper.

"And your wife, and your boy," she said softly. "They weren't there? I won't try and tell you how I feel. I think I ought to telephone now. Shall I?" But she went straight on to it. "Colonial Office?" It was. That was only the beginning. As she had said, it was a complicated business. She managed at length to hit the appropriate point of contact. "Yes, I'll hang on," she agreed. With one hand she hung on, with the other, very skilfully, she managed to prepare the tea.

"Please may I?" he offered, and forgot it once he had made the offer.

She was addressing herself to the telephone again. "Yes? Yes. I see. Well, thank you very much. Good-bye." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Danny," she said quietly. She hardly knew him, and she was quite the tight-lipped sort of English-woman, but it was impossible at such a moment to address him otherwise.

"No, of course not," he said. "I hardly expected it." It was as if there was a chestnut in his throat, which he was trying to swallow.

She poured out the tea for him.

"I have some biscuits, too," she told him, and opened a box as carefully as if she kept her jewels there.

"Thank you." He helped himself. He did not know they were, in a way, as hard to come by as jewels, for which you did not have to pay points. "I'm going down to Westerleigh, Mrs. Wingate," he said. "I don't much like the idea, but I ought to go, I suppose."

"You must be rather tired," she said. "I'm sure your mother would understand. I have the key of the flat, you know, if you want it."

"I ought to go. Besides, she was rather an old dear, in spite of that swinging shoulder-blade." He smiled wanly. She didn't inquire who he was talking about, it was easy to gather who it was, an old aunt, probably. He looked up. "If you don't mind, I'll ring up about trains."

She lifted the receiver again.

"I'll ring up. Don't let your tea go cold," she bade him. She got through to Victoria, and jotted the figures down. "There's a

train in just over half an hour," she said, "that makes the connection. Otherwise you won't get there till about teatime."

"Soon enough for me," he affirmed.

"Or perhaps you'll spend the night there?" She was getting a trifle impatient. She had duties to see to.

"Spend the night there? Good God, no!" He had a sudden vision of The Hazels on the night of the funeral of its chatelaine. The Hazels had been a Guest House, a superior and special sort of Ladies' Guest House, since before the dawn of history, or at least before the dawn of Danny's history. It had been the family home of the Letfords for several generations, excepting for an interval of some years after his grandmother's death. Then Aunt Bertha had come back to it and made it into a Guest House. The local old ladies had always loved her, and she had loved them. They found they loved each other even more enthusiastically when they wanted a holiday, and dearest Bertha Letford looked after them. A Manageress was evolved from among the honesty and the pampas grass . . . "Miss Potts" they called her. And there it was, The Hazels Guest House, very superior and special.

Danny Mather had a sudden vision of The Hazels, and it was appalling. There would be no electric light anywhere, for Miss Potts would think that indecorous; just a few candles here and there. The pictures and mirrors would be draped, blinds would be drawn, even in the lavatories, although their frosted glass imposed a perpetual twilight there. Miss Potts had an immense zest for woe and all its trappings, but she had hardly ever been able to indulge it, for it was extremely hard to die at The Hazels. She would be having a field-day, and a field-night now. She would be sniffing luxuriously in her little bed-sitting-room on the ground floor. Martha, Aunt Bertha's antediluvian maid-of-all-work, would be sniffing in the kitchen. The old lady guests would be sniffing in their private rooms. Aunt Bertha's bitch Pekinese howling in their baskets would not add to the gaiety of nations.

"Spend the night there?" Danny repeated. "That's the last thing I'd do!" She looked up a little surprised by his emphasis. "And besides," he pointed out, "I want to be on the spot here. I want to ginger them up over in Whitehall. No, I'll take that train."

"The eleven-five," she said, looking at her watch. He rose. She stretched out her hand to him, but he could not have seen it. He turned sharply away from it, and strode up the room, two yards, three yards, as far as the dresser with the blue china, then quickly back again. He seemed like a dying filament suddenly charged with a new current.

"Mrs. Wingate," he said. "It was fierce. So much happened. I'm glad it happened, too. For myself, I mean. If it had to happen I'm glad I was through it all. It's finished me off, I suppose. But that doesn't matter to anybody." He stopped a moment. "If only I could get news about *them*," he said. "There was an item

in one of the papers to-day. I saw it in the train. It said twenty-eight people, including half a dozen women and children, were taken off a small island west of Timor by a Dutch submarine. They must have been shipwrecked there. They've been landed in an Australian port. Did you see it?"

"No," she breathed.

"They might have been among them. That's possible, isn't it, Mrs. Wingate?" He spoke so wistfully it was almost too much to bear.

"People seemed to have turned up," she said, "in the strangest places." She felt diffident about offering him even such dim solace.

"Yes. West of Timor," he said again. Then he blinked hard and shook his head. He made a violent effort and thrust the woman and the small boy once more to the place behind the mêlée and the turmoil which for a time had obscured them. "Such an *awful* lot happened, straight from the word go!" The memory of it all was almost visible on his lips, like steam thudding up from a kettle. He seemed racked with the necessity of getting it off his chest, as if all this time, wherever he had been, there had been no one but foreigners around him, or deaf men. "But tell me"—the current of his thoughts had taken a violent turn—"how do you folk back home feel about it? Do you blame us?"

She opened her eyes wide. She hadn't the ghost of an idea what he was talking about.

"What *do* you mean?"

"Do you blame us for the fall of Malaya? You do, don't you? The Old School Tie! The Whisky-Swilling Planter! I know! I've heard all about it! In some ways you're right, too! Some of us saw it coming, and we should have made our weight felt more. We were dead scared of our own Chinks. We could have done something with all our policemen. A few of us——"

"But, Mr. Mather——" she expostulated.

He ignored her.

"—a few of us tried to get things done, but they thought they were sitting pretty. I mean, earlier on, even before the Japs moved into Indo-China. After that, it was a choice between Suez and Singapore. Yet you'd say it all goes back a long way before then, wouldn't you? You're right, of course you're right! So was that man in Raffles Hotel, that American! What was his name—the American newspaper man?" He faced up to her as if she had accused him personally of responsibility for the calamities that had come to pass. Her eyes were cold and grey, like Stebson's. Yes, that was the name! It didn't matter what way you turned, there they were, gazing at you from the side-lines, aloof, critical. He remembered Stebson's thin lips, and the short, precise moustache looking as if it had been painted on with lampblack. For hours and hours he had discharged the icy jet of his criticism, with the Jap

planes droning around, and the ack-ack barking spasmodically, and the bombs crumping far and near.

Then suddenly another pair of eyes were staring into his, also grey and cold like theirs, but grey with the gathering mist of death . . . the eyes of the Cockney soldier dying among the twisted mangrove roots, growing out from nowhere into nowhere.

"It ain't 'arf a lark," the lad was murmuring, the slow trickle of blood drooling from the side of his mouth. "It wasn't a bit like this 'ere. Camberley, that's where I done my soldiering. My old woman took my old gal there during the blitz, we 'ad an auntie livin' there. But I can't say she liked it. Back she went to Islington, bombs and all. Give 'er my love, guv'nor, if you ever get back to Blighty, will yer? You'll find the address in my pay-book. Yes, guv'nor, Camberley. That's where we was stationed. Then this 'ere blinkin' war comes, and wallop, we're out 'ere. You can't see nobody, that's the trouble. You can't see a thing! Then bash! That lump of leaves ain't no leaves, it's a sniper! And it's your lot! It ain't right, sir! That's what I say! It don't give nobody a chance, do it? Alf, the name is, Alf Bessel. She's a swell kid, guv'nor. . . . What's that, sir? I can't 'ear you, sir! Yes, sir, from Islington. . . ."

Then there was the stern old lady on the promenade deck going up the coast of India towards Bombay. She was as hard as iron, that one was.

"The trouble is that the Army in Malaya wouldn't fight. It just ran away. Perfectly disgraceful! In the old days . . . the old days . . . the old days. . . ."

He remembered how his brain had stopped short at those words. They kept on repeating themselves like a gramophone record held up by a scratch. For he had seen the dying Cockney from the East Surreys as clear as daylight, only a few feet behind her, weltering in the pool of his own blood. He had wanted to slap her hard in the face, but what good would that have done, as the record went round and round. . . . ? Weren't the old women saying exactly the same thing in the spa hotels of Bournemouth, in Scarborough, in Boston, Massachusetts?

He stood and stared, his back to the steamer railings; he sat and stared, balancing his cup of tea in South Kensington. The whole world stared back at him from the side-lines. He was Malaya, the Briton in Malaya. The Sandhurst General, the Wimbledon Civil Servant, the Old School Tie, the Whisky-Swilling Planter.

You didn't make much of a job of it, did you, buddy!

It wasn't 'arf a lark, it wasn't! Didn't give nobody a chance did it!

The trouble is that the Army in Malaya wouldn't fight. Perfectly disgraceful. In the old days . . . the old days . . . the old days . . .

He didn't want to move from Mrs. Wingate's room. He had so much to say, to account for, and he wasn't too sure how much time

he had left to do it in. He wanted her to understand. If they had been to blame, they'd made up for it one way and another. And yet . . . and yet . . . it could have been quite glorious. And it wasn't. Whose fault was it? London? Vichy? Singapore?

The woman had risen now. She was turned away from him, standing over a small desk sorting out papers.

"Good Lord!" he blushed fiercely. He was behaving like a tick. "Thank you! You must forgive me! I've been an awful nuisance!" He stooped and lifted his attaché-case.

She turned and smiled politely.

"Not at all," she assured him. "You must tell me all about it some day, won't you! Remember me to your mother! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" he murmured, like a small boy leaving the head-master's study after a talking-to.

She turned to the desk again. After all, they too, had been through something, over here in London.

CHAPTER TWO

It was some four months since Danny Mather had left Malaya—if "leaving" wasn't a funny way to put it. It was some two months before that he had last set eyes on his wife and child. He had returned to civilization by way of Colombo, and for the first few weeks he had been kept pretty busy, merely keeping going. He certainly couldn't ever recall he had ever been in an expository, or even anecdotal, mood about the campaign, and the state of things preceding it. He came up against a fair number of ex-Malayans during that period, and, from the strictly domestic angle, many of them had had as much of a dose as he had. None the less, he could not refrain from asking questions about Helen and Edward. The English community of Malaya, that is so say, the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements, was not vast. You often knew about people whom you hadn't actually met. The army and navy people were more or less off your beat, particularly those whom the war had brought to Malaya . . . and forgot for the most part to bring back again. (The air force people, at the best of times, were about enough to fill a station buggy.) But he asked everybody. Had anyone seen anywhere a young woman, rather good-looking, about twenty-six, the nose slightly tip-tilted and the mouth fresh and full, and with her a small boy, fair hair, blue eyes? The

woman might have shown signs of injury. So might the boy, for that matter.

No. Nobody had heard anything, excepting for the born idiot who was constitutionally incapable of admitting there was something he knew absolutely nothing about. But Danny soon learned to recognize the specimen. Then, as the weeks went by, he began to get nervous and self-conscious. He felt people knew all about what he was going to ask them before he even opened his mouth. He could see people looking sorry for him, or a little apprehensive; as if they were saying to themselves: "Oh, Lord, here comes that ghastly bore."

So he stopped talking. His mouth shut like a trap.

After a spell in hospital in Colombo, he went north by liner. From Baghdad to Damascus he had travelled in an air-conditioned railway-coach as cushy as the Pullman from London to Brighton, with a lot of brass-hats who looked as if London to Brighton was all they had known of the war until they started commuting between Baghdad and Damascus. They didn't like his attaché-case at all. They felt it let their red tabs down. In Jerusalem the bugs that had been lying in ambush in his guts broke cover and attacked. He had been having a set-to with them for several years now. They were like the primitive Sakai in the Malayan jungle: nobody knew much about them, but when they launched their poisoned blow-darts it hurt. The attack in Jerusalem had been far worse than anything he had known before. They seemed to have got a whole army of reinforcements even more mysterious than themselves, probably some time during that escape across jungle and mangrove-swamp to the fishing village of Batu Laut. So he passed out, over there in Jerusalem, and he hadn't wanted to talk anything over with anybody. And of course people in those parts wouldn't know anything about Helen and Edward. So when the Colonial Office people considered him fit to travel, they sent him back quick. They even managed, at the last moment, to get him a berth in a plane, for some big shot had passed out on the way, and his place was vacant. They were pleased about that. They didn't want him dying on their hands somewhere between Aden and Freetown.

But he hadn't died. He had got home. And the minute he got out of the seaplane and stepped into the launch that took him ashore, an itch went straight up from the soles of his feet to his tongue. He wanted to talk. First of all about Helen; but that of course wasn't so much talking as asking. Any news from Helen? The harbour people didn't know, and he didn't ask them. But it needed (he perceived with astonishment) quite a lot of self-control not to start discharging Malaya at them, the retreat to Kajang, the mud and bullets of the Muar River, the Chinese woman in Johore Bahru, carrying in one hand a clock, in the other her child's limbless body. No, he had managed not to accost anybody all the way to

London. He was getting nearer to his mother, and what was a mother good for if you couldn't start talking, and talk and talk and talk at her, talk and talk at her, until you had discharged some fraction of the huge load you carried of anxiety and fright, of pride and shame?

And his mother wasn't there, and an air-raid warden woman was. She was all right, a damn decent sort when you came to think of it. A bit sticky, though . . . wore the Old School Tie for a hat-band.

He got his ticket at Victoria, with only a minute or two to make his train. As he approached the barrier, he saw a fellow he had met in Singapore during that frantic week after his arrival from Kuala Lumpur; or he thought it was the fellow. In a second, his mother, his dead Aunt Bertha, the funeral in Westerleigh, were as completely out of his mind as *insula, insulam.* Had the fellow heard anything from anybody about Helen, or the youngster, or anything? How had the fellow got away, in a freighter, in a sampan, or how?

But it wasn't the fellow. When you biffed him on the shoulder, the fellow turned and stared with a very cold and fishy eye.

So he raced back to the platform, pushed the porter aside, and made for an open door with the aid of a notable flying tackle, the attaché-case describing a wide parabola. Quite up to the old Selangor standard, he told himself, the last time we played Perak. The old bugs haven't got me down yet. (He meant not the Japs, but the bacilli. It had been very mysterious, the game of hide and seek they had been playing in his guts these last few years.)

The train was crowded, there wasn't a seat anywhere. That's all right, he thought. I'll stand up in the corridor and look out. There's always enough in the country to keep *me* busy, when we *get* to the country. It's had a bit of a pasting all this, hasn't it? He was looking out on the gouged-out factories, the gutted slum dwellings of the South London reaches. Wow! That was a neat one! Like the one that got the Malaya Traction Company's outfit on Collyer Quay. (There was only one standard of reference now. He bit his lip wryly.) Vauxhall, Clapham, Streatham. It won't be long now before we're in the country.

In the country. He almost shouted the words out loud. He'd been in the country already to-day. What was that stuff between Poole and Waterloo? And he might as well have been in a damned tunnel for all he'd seen of it! He *had* been in a tunnel! For God's sake, Danny, try and crawl out of it!

Well, here it was. Here was the country beginning now. The country, the English country, had always been Danny's department. He had spent practically all his childhood in Westerleigh, with this same Aunt Bertha, now apparently deceased, during the time when his mother and father were still together, he looking after the gas and coke fittings, and she looking after him, a long way off

in Mexico. And then the old man had passed out in one of those odd tropical ways, so his mother had come home again. But Danny had still spent a lot of time in Westerleigh, while his mother had earned a living for both of them. And at length he had become an engineer, and that was helpful all round.

He was a pretty good engineer, everyone knew that, but he was a countryman at heart. He knew a lot more than anybody but the professionals about birds and trees, and moths and butterflies, and God knows what. He would have been quite happy to spend all his life in some cosy English village rooting round among ferns and sticking pins in butterflies. But, of course, Aunt Susan wouldn't stand for it! Damn her eyes! If it hadn't been for Aunt Susan . . . Oh, well, it was no good thinking that way. When the war came, if he hadn't been demolishing tin dredges and bridges in Malaya, he'd have been handling a tank in Libya, or a plane over Scheveningen.

But Helen would have been all right, Edward would have been all right, if it hadn't been for Aunt Susan. Don't talk that way, Danny! They might have been wiped out just as completely in Putney or Cobham.

Wiped out? What the hell are you talking about? He turned furiously on a hapless gentleman standing on his right hand. Drunk, concluded the gentleman, and edged away cautiously.

It's mid-June. It's been mid-June all the way between Winchester and Waterloo. It might have been a pea-soup fog in November. The hawthorn bloom still hung to the hawthorn hedges, but here and there the fallen petals lay in the ditches like a first fall of snow. Poppies were coming up in the furrows, and charlock stretched over the fields like yellow sheets put out to dry. That's a brimstone butterfly, isn't it, dithering out from under the elder-tree hard by the line here? I get mixed up with the Malayan butterflies. It must have meant something, the way I got that Raja Brooke's Birdwing the week before war broke out. It was too good to happen. I'd been after it for twelve years. The female . . . white and green . . . *damned* rare!

What's that bird now? I couldn't hear it, of course, but I'll swear it was a goldfinch. Goldfinch over the brambles. Do you remember? On the edge of Friar's Crag, up there in Derwentwater. Goldfinch and cornflower, in Friar's Crag, Helen!

The film was already dropping over his eyes again. Those trees in the woods, lining the roads, leaning over the hedges, they were not oak, ash, beech, poplar, lime any more. They rose from their places, thinning out the woods, filling up the meadows. They were rubber trees, rubber, rubber, endless acres of dun uniform monochrome rubber, each and all of the hundreds of thousands bearing the identical scar, at exactly the same height from the ground, each bearing the identical metal spout and cup. What shadows were those down that far lugubrious avenue? Were they

shadows? They could not be unswept twigs and leaves? Were they a Jap scouting party, advancing or retreating? Who was that they were carrying off with them, prodding them with their bayonets, and grinning like mad, so that their teeth showed like a box full of upset dominoes?

A woman and a small boy, was it?

He turned again to the gentleman in whom he had already caused a certain alarm earlier in the journey. It was clear to the gentleman the hollow-cheeked fellow was going to start talking loud and plenty. The gentleman turned abruptly and sought at least temporary refuge in the lavatory.

He changed at Horsham, and he had a seat now. He did not lift his attaché-case to the rack. He felt better with it lying across his knees. Before the train moved off, a soldier got into his carriage, with his wife and small boy. She was a nice-looking little woman, and the small boy was all right, too. The soldier did not say much; he puffed at his pipe, and looked from his wife to his boy and back again. It was all he wanted. Once he took out his handkerchief and dabbed the boy's nose, which needed a little attention. A little later he took out a bag of sweets and gave one each to the woman and child, and took one himself. He made a perfunctory offer of the bag to the other people in the carriage, but of course they refused. He knocked out his pipe and sucked his sweet tranquilly. Then he unfolded a copy of the *Daily Sketch*, but he did not look at it. He looked over the edge of the paper at his wife and small boy.

The haggard young man in the corner with the protruding cheek-bones got up and left the carriage, his bag going with him as if it were tied to his hand with a string. His mouth was twitching. Obviously his nerves were not in good shape. He walked a few yards down the corridor and stationed himself before a window as on the earlier stage of his journey.

"It's a pity I'm too late for the cherry-blossom," he told himself. "It looks as if it's going to be a good crop. There'll be news of you long before then, Helen, old girl, won't there?"

He got out of the train at Westerleigh, and hung about doubtfully for a minute or two in the drab little station hall. What is the right thing for a fellow to do when he turns up suddenly in his old aunt's village from a place three-quarters of the world away, all the more when it is the day of the old aunt's funeral? Does he ring up from the station and say: "I'm here!"? Or isn't that a bit awkward with a body lying about the place—as it might still be—and people standing about in dim corners mopping their eyes? On the other hand, just to turn up might be a little startling, too. It was true his mother knew he had got away from Malaya. She seemed to have received both his cables, from Colombo and Bombay, though she should have had a later one, too, from Jerusalem.

Damn that red-headed Welshman! He advanced a step or two towards the ticket-office to see if he could telephone from there to The Hazels; then he felt: no, he couldn't do it. If they hadn't carried the old lady off yet, the undertakers would be standing around with hammers and nails. A telephone-bell ringing would be most unpleasant. No, he decided, he'd just turn up.

He left the station and descended the ramp towards the old Norman church. He blinked hard, and sluiced the soot from his eyes. The elder trees on the embankment, the yew trees in the churchyard, the line of poplars beyond the meadows . . . how ridiculously they were exactly as they had always been. You expected them, somehow, to look just a little the worse for wear, not because there had been bombs dropped in the English Home Counties but because the "Spotted Dog" in Kuala Lumpur had had its roof knocked cock-eyed, and because tanks had churned up the greens at the Bukit Timah golf-club in Singapore.

But if you looked and listened a little closer everything wasn't really exactly as it had always been. For instance, that huge old barn down the road on the left there, which had always seemed pretty nearly as solid as Stonehenge, well, it wasn't solid any more. An incendiary had got it some time or other, and it looked like a charred hen-roost made of three-ply wood. Across the junction of the station road with the highway a platoon of soldiers in full kit marched, whistling in unison. Up in the blue heavens the fowl swaying and dipping were not crows, or they were not only crows; they were aeroplanes. Oh, yes, Westerleigh was at war, too, just as much as London was, and Kuala Lumpur had been.

Kuala Lumpur was not at war any more. It lay under the thick yellow silt as deep submerged as the prehistoric Mayan and Cambodian cities. How long would it take, years or centuries, before it was disinterred again? It was strange what frail things survived the most massive mischances. Would someone come some day on that pleasant little gold-framed water-colour of Helen that he had always carried everywhere? Would the spade click against the silver cup he had won at school for being second best all-round sportsman?

At the road-crossing he waited for the troops to pass. It was extraordinary how thrilling that sound of whistling was, what a sad and sweet lilt there was to it.

But the sound was as inhuman as violins or bagpipes. Their young faces were quite expressionless. They were soldiers on the march, to Aldershot or Tartary. Would it be their lot, too, he wondered, to defend some bastion that already had been lost for them, Aden, Cape Town? If Singapore fell, why not these? How far would the swine reach, he asked himself, before we stand and hold, before we hit out again?

He had come to the turn in the road now where the stile led

across the yellow water-meadows to the Turpins' farm. Beyond were Hadnam Woods, where so often as a boy he had gone birds'-nesting. A hundred yards along the road was Fawley House, one of the most beautiful Queen Anne houses in these parts. He had known each shrub, each flower-bed, like the back of his hand. Some distance further was the old lych-gate that stood over against the narrower end of Westerleigh Green. There the two roads met and parted company again, to run along the northern and southern edges of the green. At the hither end of the green was the Barley-corn, standing under its elms. Diagonally across was a group of three pleasant Georgian houses, each with its low hedge and small shrubbery and strip of lawn. The central house of these three was The Hazels, the house of mourning, half obscured on its left-hand side by a tall Spanish chestnut, that thrust its great branches high over the road.

"Well, thank the Lord," Danny murmured, "I don't see any hearses littering the place. But I think I hear Miss Potts sniffing, even at this distance. Do I? Or is it a horse in the meadow?"

Owing to that Spanish chestnut it was not until Danny actually reached the garden gate that he had a clear view of The Hazels. The house had, he noticed at once, a clear view of him. There were no drawn blinds, as there was no hearse. All the windows shone agreeably in the sun, outlined by their rosy chintz curtains.

"What's all this?" he asked himself, as he reached out his hand to press the latch of the gate. "Isn't anybody dead?" And even as the question formed itself, he caught sight of the Letford women, all six of them, not merely four or five, all six of them, sitting within the framework of the dining-room bay window. One of those six sisters was the most palpable of them. She sat facing the garden path, it is true. But she sat neither at the head nor the foot of the table. She was by no means the largest of them; she was, in fact, the eldest, and the smallest. But you were immediately so much more aware of her than her five consorts that the others were hardly there at all. That one was Aunt Susan. Yes, there was the eminent Aunt Susan. And there, as the phrase formed itself in Danny's mind, was that bloody big turkey. And that was almost all. And, of course, the dead Aunt Bertha was there, too, among her sisters. Aunt Bertha was, in fact, not dead at all.

"Well, I'll be goddamed!" cried Danny, who was addicted to American modes of speech. "Aunt Susan must have raised Aunt Bertha from the dead. That's the only explanation. God Almighty what a *terrific* woman!"

The hand that was reaching out to unlatch the gate completed the movement. He pushed the gate open and advanced along the garden path. There they sat, the six sisters, as large as life and blooming with health, though the youngest was over sixty years old. The air-raid warden woman over in London seemed to have made a pretty mess up of it. Funeral, indeed! Why not a christening?

If Aunt Susan could raise Aunt Bertha from the dead, there was no particular reason to believe Aunt Susan couldn't produce a baby as well if she wanted to. She was a spinster, of course. But that wouldn't worry Aunt Susan. She had always done things without the help of a man. At the head of the table, in front of the turkey, sat Aunt Bertha. It was nice of Aunt Susan to permit that. At the foot of the table sat his mother. Facing the garden was Aunt Susan, between the youngest sisters, the indistinguishable twins Aunt Mona and Aunt Edie, their noses slightly red, as if they had colds coming on. They had their eyes turned sideways rather fearfully towards Aunt Susan, as if they had just asked for a second helping of something, and weren't sure Aunt Susan would approve. You got the impression, somehow, that Aunt Susan had an extra handkerchief in her handbag to use on Mona's and Edie's noses, if they got a bit out of hand. Then there was the remaining sister, Aunt Lavinia. She had her back turned. She always had her back, or at least her face, turned. She was the one who had married beneath herself, and had all those daughters, and no one knew anything much about any of them. Danny's mother, too, born Angela Letford, had married beneath herself. It was almost impossible for a Letford, that is to say, if she had Gilchrist blood in her veins, not to marry beneath herself. (The Letford father of these girls had married a Gilchrist girl.) But Aunt Lavinia had married a greengrocer, or something. She was a rather silent old lady, the next in years to the arch-priestess. She wore pince-nez. You could never tell what was going on behind them.

Well, it obviously wasn't a funeral. Probably it wasn't really a christening. What then? An idea thrust itself on his mind, but he at once rejected it, smiling at its fatuity. There was news from Helen and Edward, they were all right, they had come through. So the old dames had got together to celebrate it. No, he muttered, not bloody likely.

Then suddenly an aspect of the situation presented itself that startled him like a sudden shout in the ear. What the hell had brought all these six dames together, here in Westerleigh, in Sussex, from the widely separated parts of England they lived in, so far afield as Exeter and Darlington? Though they were no spring chickens they probably all had war jobs, for Letford women had consciences. Travelling in wartime was no picnic even to people less than half their age. What business was it that had trowelled them up by the roots and deposited them at The Hazels like so many dahlia bulbs in a basket? What the hell *was* it? Not four of them, not five, all six of them. Then he realized that never in all his born days had he seen these six women together, cheek by jowl, under one roof. He believed that as a group they were not particularly interested in each other. They had lived such separated lives, one hardly thought of them as sisters at all.

All six of them. A public meeting. He grinned savagely.

What an audience! Now at last he'd be able to shoot this Malaya business off his chest good and proper. The whole works!

It was about forty or fifty paces from the garden gate to the front door, and he more than half expected that the women in the room would spot him as he came along. He felt that the unheralded appearance of any man on that maidenly lawn ought to be manifest to them, particularly when that man was the son of one of them, and the nephew of the other five; even more particularly when this son, this nephew, had just come up from the Antipodes, where a campaign had been fought in which the majority of the British combatants had either been killed or had disappeared into limbo.

Well, they were too busy talking and tucking into that damn bird to be aware of anybody on the other side of the window. It hurt his *amour-propre* a bit, but there it was. He just didn't register. Then he pulled the old-fashioned bell-pull till it almost came away from the wall. Not only the bell pealed somewhere far down the passage, but the Pekinese pealed. There had always been four Pekinese, all bitches, at The Hazels, but they sounded like forty. What a yelping and yapping there was!

"That's Patricia!" Danny said to himself. "I could recognize *her* voice in a thousand! And Eurydice. And Carlotta. And Elinor. *What* a welcome!" As far as he knew they were the same Patricia, Eurydice, Carlotta and Elinor that he had known at The Hazels as a small boy. They were even then the oldest things on God's earth excepting Aunt Susan. He wasn't sure that any of them had died off since. All these women couldn't die.

Suddenly the dogs stopped barking in the dining-room. There was silence. The silence continued, so complete that he wondered whether the scene he had witnessed through the windows had not been some sort of illusion, and perhaps The Hazels was a house of the dead after all. Then he heard steps. The steps paused. You got the feeling that a little door behind a grille, as in a nunnery, would be drawn back any moment now. But it was the front door itself that was drawn back, not more than six inches in all. A hand, nose and a wrinkled upper lip became manifest.

"Very sorry," said a voice. "It was Miss Letford's orders nobody was to be let in to-day," and the hand proceeded to close the door to again.

Oh, damn Miss Letford! Oh, damn Aunt Susan! He knew well enough there was only one Miss Letford when Aunt Susan was about. She was in control of the situation right enough.

"Martha!" cried Danny. "What the devil are you all up to? Let me in! It's me, Danny!"

The hand held the door fast as if hand and door were clamped together. Then suddenly there was an excited squawk. The hand tugged the door backward across the threshold.

"Master Danny! Master Danny!" the old woman shrilled.

"Thank the Lord God, so you're well, eh! Come straight in, God bless you! I'm sure——" Then she stopped. She lifted her hand to her mouth, as if she had been doing something she ought not to, like hiccuping in church. Then "Shush!" she said. "You'll please be quiet, will you?"

He looked at her as if she were quite mad. He couldn't make out the point of shushing when six healthy old ladies are gathered round a roast turkey, tucking in heartily. He crossed the threshold and put the old woman on one side with his shoulder.

"For God's sake what's it all about?" he cried; then he strode along the hallway, past the faded oil portraits of the Gilchrist family, the family where grandfather Letford had found his bride, and reached the door of the dining-room. He twisted the door-handle, flung open the door, and entered. From far across the room the smell of the turkey's well-basted skin struck his nostrils. Out of four baskets came the death-rattle growl of four dogs. Six women turned their heads to see who the intruder was, and whether they recognized him at once, or mistook him for someone else, they stared at him, not as if he were a living creature, but a ghost.

"Hullo, everybody!" he shouted, or tried to. For some seconds the words would not issue from his lips, the six women so took his breath away staring at him so oddly. God Almighty, as if they were *frightened* of him. As if he were the last person in all the world they wanted to see there. His mother, too . . . the same went for his mother. She wasn't his mother just then, she was just one of those six sisters.

"Hello, everybody!" he brought out at length. "It's me, Danny! Aren't you pleased to see me? Hello, mother!" He set his bag down and strode over to her where she sat at the foot of the table. She said nothing. Her eyes were round and large, her mouth quivered a little. "Damn it, mother!" he cried. "It's me! Do you want me to go away again?"

Nobody said a word, everybody continued in this state of shock or fright, for still several seconds that seemed to last minutes. But he heard the reply quite clearly though no one uttered it. *Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!* It rebounded from the sideboard, from the plaster cornices. *Yes! Yes! For God's sake, go!*

He made for his bag, lifted it, then turned to go. There was nothing for it. He had come a long way, and didn't propose to go all the way back again. But, God Almighty, he was going to get to hell out of this place in double quick time!

Then he heard his mother's voice:

"Danny!" she brought out, a queer, strangled sort of noise it was. She screwed up her eyes and shook her head, as you do when you bang against a post and are stunned for a time.

He turned back to her. She had got up from her chair, and was advancing towards him with her hands outstretched.

"Darling!" she called out. "You *scared* us! Where have you

come from? Why didn't you let us know you were coming? Are you all right? Put your bag down, darling!"

He did so. That was better. That was balm for the hurt spirit. They kissed each other warmly, a normal mother and son. And before he had time to answer, as if she divined quite clearly he could not possibly be all right unless there was news from his dear ones: "Tell me, darling," she asked, "have you had news yet . . . from the others?"

"No!" he exclaimed sharply. His heart was suddenly like a lump of lead. He had not dared to hope that his mother would have some word for him, but it was hateful to get it said so starkly. "No! I rang up! There's no news yet!" He turned to the other women. They seemed to have recovered their balance.

"Hello, aunts!" he said. "I hope you're well!"

If Aunt Susan had been put off her stroke by his unexpected appearance, there was no evidence of it in the words she addressed to him.

"What brought you here? How long are you staying?" Her mouth closed hard and thin like a screwed-up vice. Her eyes glittered with hostility.

It was almost too much for Aunt Bertha. "Danny dear," she gurgled. "We're glad to see you." She had an extraordinarily liquid voice, like any number of wood-pigeons in a tree-top. "Aunt Susan means we just weren't . . . expecting you."

"I'm quite capable of explaining what I mean myself," Aunt Susan insisted sharply.

"Yes, Susan dear," admitted Bertha. She was never one for an argument. "Come and kiss your old aunt, Danny!"

He went over to her and kissed her, as he had done twice a day, year after year, when he used to spend his long hols. with her as a small boy at his prep. school. Then he went up to Aunt Lavinia.

"How are you, aunt? I'm sorry I'm such a nuisance." She kissed him warmly. Under the dour discouraged face she was really a warm-hearted old thing. "I *did* send a wire this morning," he explained to the company. "I also wired from Jerusalem, but there seems to have been some accident about that."

He looked round. There was still the twin aunts. "And you, and Aunt Edie! Aunt Mona? Are you fit?"

The twins took their cue from Aunt Susan. It had been that way for some three score years now, and it was likely to go on. They were capable, in Aunt Susan's absence, of being as warm and sweet as bread-poultices. But it wasn't that way now.

"How do you do?" said Aunt Edie coldly, as if he were some tradesman who had mistaken the front door for the back door. "How are you?" said Aunt Mona. They offered their left temples. His lips brushed them, and that was that. The four Pekinese, ranged along the wall to the left of the window, looked on frigidly from their baskets, following each of his movements with intense

absorption. As he retreated from the chilly encounter with the twins, one of the dogs sidled out and made shadowily for Danny's calf. It was Carlotta. That had always been one of Carlotta's favourite tricks.

"Basket, Carlotta dear!" requested Aunt Bertha. "Naughty!"

"Dogs all right?" asked Danny. It seemed about as sensible a question as any other.

"The little dears!" was all that Aunt Bertha found it necessary to say. Carlotta was back in her basket. The four rumps of the four animals wagged as if it was with their rumps, not their ears, they heard their mistress's voice.

"You'd better sit down and have some lunch," ordered Aunt Susan. It had been decided you can't turn up from nine thousand miles away and not have lunch. "Ring the bell, Bertha!" Bertha reached for the wall and rang the bell.

"You look half starved," his mother said. "When did you last have anything to eat? Come, dear, there's room beside me." She got up to bring over one of the dining-room chairs against the wall. "When did you send the wire, darling? Yes, all right, my dear." He had taken the chair from her, and was holding it before him, half-way between the wall and the table.

"I wired you as soon as the plane got in this morning," he told his mother. Then he turned to the company at large. "Now look here, aunts, I don't want to barge in on some family jamboree, you know. I can easily get a bite at the Barleycorn."

"Oh!" screamed Aunt Mona. It was almost as if some man had suddenly appeared in the door in his pants.

"The Barleycorn! Certainly not!" said Aunt Bertha. That was perhaps the first time for a good many decades she had publicly acknowledged the existence of the public-house, although it was only a couple of hundred yards away from the front gate. To the Letford ladies, or at least some of them, the Barleycorn had just never existed, merely because it had the effrontery to exist within eyeshot of their windows. There were, they would have admitted if pressed, public-houses elsewhere in Great Britain. But no Barleycorn.

Well, that was that. It was final.

The maid, Martha, the not less ancient Martha, was in the room now.

"Lay a place for Mr. Mather!" requested Aunt Susan.

"Yes, Miss Letford," murmured Martha. There was a hint of a curtsy before she went to get the things out of the sideboard drawers. It didn't seem a bit like nineteen-forty-two. And it didn't seem a bit like the third year of a big and unpleasant war.

"Honestly," protested Danny, "I feel awful. I don't know what it's all about, but I know it must be *something* to bring you all together. Anyhow, that woman's all wet, Aunt Bertha. That's a

good thing. Your air-raid woman, mother," he explained. "Mrs. Wingate, I think she said."

"Oh, yes, of course," his mother said. "Mrs. Wingate told you where I was."

"She said Aunt Bertha was dead, too."

"Oh!" said Aunt Bertha. She looked extremely offended. "Not at all!"

"I mean she said you'd gone to a funeral, mother, over here in Westerleigh. So I thought it was Aunt Bertha. Sorry, aunt dear." He sensed that the topic was most repugnant to Aunt Bertha. He went over to her and patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

There was dead silence. It was really most uncomfortable. The dogs glared like cockatrices out of their baskets.

"I think I'd better explain," said Aunt Susan. Her voice was cold and incisive. "To-day is the anniversary of a funeral . . . the fiftieth anniversary of our mother's funeral. We've taken a good deal of trouble to get together in our old home. She died here and was buried here. We were devoting the day to her memory. Sit down, please." The old dame was really very dignified. The turkey was very dignified, quite a good line in funeral baked meats. In the Letford family a love of good things to eat had not been lacking. It had surmounted several wars.

"You must have an awful lot to tell us, darling," his mother said. "Later on you must tell us *everything*."

"Yes, you must," Aunt Bertha corroborated.

He wasn't aware they had spoken. Something odd happened. The sensation came quite suddenly. Danny Mather felt his feet were not on the floor. He felt his head must bump against the ceiling any moment. He did not sit down. He felt he could not have remained seated.

"What d'you mean?" he said. "Vivtieth anniverzary?" Something had happened to his speech. The consonants were all blurred. It was as if somebody had passed a wad steeped in some sort of laughing-gas under his nostrils. "You mean . . . vivtieth anniverzary," he repeated, as if that hadn't been established clearly enough. "Old lady died vivty years ago, so you've gome . . . from all over the blace. . . ."

He stopped. It wasn't true. No, not true. In the middle of a damn big war, islands, countries, continents heaving with millions of men making war, like so many shaking ant-hills . . . war up in the skies, down in the depths of all the seas . . . these six old ladies pick up their little handbags and travel across a country all sticky and creaky with war-effort . . . these six old ladies get together in the village where their old mother, fifty years ago, was carted off to her nice comfortable grave . . . get together and eat roast turkey. . .

Ancestor worship. Yes. *That* was it. Exactly like in Malaya, the Chinese.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he tittered. It was a foreboding of sounds

to come. It's the big day. You go to the shrine of the old boys and the old girls, unveil the old tablets, marble or soapstone, or ivory plaques on carved blackwood stands. Beautiful lettering. If the old folk are of recent vintage, there may be a photograph stuck on, too. There's candles and incense burning, the old folk are hungry. Give 'em roast turkey. Beg pardon, moon cakes piled in pyramids on porcelain stands. Rice, lovely crisp rice. The old folk want money. Burn nice paper money for them. Mumbo-jumbo, mumbo-jumbo.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he tittered again, rather damn funny. Then suddenly a spark ignited the whiff of gas that had been in his nostrils, and an explosion filled his whole skull. He burst into laughter. He laughed and he laughed till his ribs and belly were sore, till his face was black, as if a fruit-stone were lodged in his windpipe. And at length the laughter died in him. His shirt was drenched with sweat. He found himself sitting hunched up in the chair he had been moving along from the sideboard. He had not the faintest idea that his Aunt Lavinia had for some time been slapping his back as you do a child having a fit, or that his mother had been violently chafing his hands as if they were frostbitten.

There was dead silence in the room. He became aware now that his mother was standing over him, pressing his head to her bosom. She had taken out her handkerchief and was wiping his forehead. He saw a movement towards the chair where Aunt Lavinia had been sitting. It was, in fact, Aunt Lavinia going back to her chair again. No one else had moved.

The silence continued for some time, till Mrs. Mather broke it at length.

"He's overwrought," she said. "You must forgive him." She was addressing her eldest sister. "He's been expecting news."

He felt very limp indeed, like something that has been rained on in a gutter for a long time.

"I'm awfully sorry," he murmured. "You must all think me an awful cad!"

The situation was altogether beyond the three youngest sisters. Bertha made noises like the wood-pigeons, which could mean anything, compassion, annoyance, anything. Edie and Mona kept on tut-tut-tutting, which had the same effect, and fumbling with their handkerchiefs. Lavinia behaved more positively. She seemed to think nothing much could be done while she still sat in her chair. She rose and waddled over to Susan, and placed her hands on her shoulders.

"Susan," she said, "he's Angela's boy. You know how mother doted on Angela."

Susan's face was rock-like, and blank as a rock.

"Go back to your chair, Lavinia," she said. "The bird will be quite uneatable." She lifted her knife and fork and got to work. She gave it to be understood that Danny Mather was not there. He

had not turned up unexpectedly from the other end of the world. He had not shoved himself uninvited into the congress of elegiac sisters. He had not looked round and guffawed like a drunken coster on Hampstead Heath. Because he just was not there at all.

That produced a slight slackening of the tension. If he wasn't there, and he had some lunch, he would only seem to be having some lunch. The only alternative was to order him off the premises, because he had enraged his eldest aunt. And even the twins would not have stood for that, however completely subject they were to Susan's will. You can't turn up out of the fall of an Empire and be sent off to buy yourself a sandwich.

Aunt Bertha was digging at the carcass with the prongs of the big carving-fork.

"I'm afraid there's not much of the white meat left, Danny dear," she regretted. "Do you mind the brown?"

"Thanks awfully, aunt. Really, I couldn't eat a thing."

"He's very partial to the leg, dear," his mother pointed out. "Give him that leg. He likes the stuffing, too." Edie helped him to cauliflower. The plate went across to Lavinia for the roast potatoes.

"There you are, dear," said Aunt Lavinia, for her quite briskly. Then she retired for a time behind her pince-nez, to watch developments.

"Excuse me, sir," murmured Martha. "Here's the sauce-boat, sir." She laid the plate down before him, and left the room, as if she had been in a hailstorm and was glad to be getting out of it.

"How's Miss Potts?" mumbled Danny. "Is she all right?"

"Perfectly all right," insisted Aunt Bertha brightly, as if somebody had been saying she wasn't. "Just a little of her old migraine now and again, otherwise perfectly all right."

"That's fine," Danny brought out. He made a little noise with his knife and fork. The five junior aunts, if you could by some stretch of language call them junior, made covering noises with their knives and forks, as if Aunt Susan might consider the noise from Danny a provocation. Aunt Susan, too, got going with her knife and fork. There was nothing for some moments but the faint movements, and fainter noises, of eating. The atmosphere was not happy.

Can I stand it? Danny was thinking. Can I possibly stand it? Shall I throw this leg of turkey in her face and get out? Perhaps we did enough getting out in Malaya. I'm all in. The bugs are stirring in their sleep. I'm in for another go of the jim-jams, to-night or to-morrow. If only mother got the idea. "Sorry, everybody," she'd say. "I've got to go now. I want to look after Danny. After all, he's still alive, you know, more or less." But there isn't a hope in hell. She doesn't know anything. Besides, these girls have not been together for fifty long years. Fifty. It's pretty certain they'll never be together again, all six of them, as long

as monkeys have tails. They're having fun, the dears. You've no right to spoil the fun, Danny.

But there's been a bit of a hold-up on the line, hasn't there? The signals are all red. Who's going to clear the line? The twins and Bertha don't carry guns enough. Mother's the mother of the pain in the neck, the less said by her the better. Lavinia's invisible, or she's at least in ambush behind her spectacles. That leaves Susan herself, as engine-driver, stationmaster, the whole works.

What's old Susan thinking? You can't tell a thing from that face. It's like a chunk of rock on Dartmoor. Perhaps she's punishing them all. Aunt Mona, at all events, is at the point of tears. Ah, the old buzzard's spotted it.

"You're quite wrong, Mona," Aunt Susan declared. "They did not."

Having no smelling-salts, Mona lifted her handkerchief to her nostrils. She hadn't the faintest idea what she was wrong about.

"The Pumphrey-Sandhursts didn't send a wreath at all!" Susan declared. "They didn't even send flowers." She glared at her other sisters, as if to warn them of the results of contradiction.

Do I understand? Danny asked himself. Do I hear the tinny clang of the station-bell? The green light's gone up, I think. The line's clear.

"I'm sure she was *there*," Bertha stoutly insisted. "Which only makes it worse, in a manner of speaking."

Even Mona, who was not at all clever, got the point. Yes, the line was clear.

"I remember her hat," tittered Mona. "Tee-hee-hee! She was wearing such a funny hat. Like a saucepan!"

"Not at all!" Susan rebuked her. "You were ten years old. You don't remember a thing. It wasn't Mrs. Pumphrey-Sandhurst who wore that hat. It was Mrs. Arthur Foley. Am I right, Lavinia?" But it wasn't really a question. It was an assertion.

"Yes, my dear, I'm sure you're right," Lavinia agreed, as from the other side of a thick hedge.

"She might have worn a more seemly hat," Susan resumed. "I don't think there was anybody in the neighbourhood on whom our mother showered more kindnesses."

"Among people of *our* sort, at least," Bertha specified. "Nobody will ever know how much she did for the . . . other people."

"She was a very good woman," Angela murmured. The train was out of the station, and jogging along comfortably. "I shall always remember mother's voice. It was a good voice. I can hear it now."

If it was possible for Susan's face to soften, it softened then.

"For instance, the way she treated the Lumleys," Bertha remembered. "Not that they showed themselves particularly grateful."

Susan's face sharpened again, like a knife on a whetstone.

"That business of the perambulator mother gave them," Angela murmured. "Fancy your remembering that. You were very young."

"It happened the year mother died. I was fourteen."

"And mother still kept on being kind to them," said Edie. "I remember distinctly. I remember hearing you all talk about them."

"The Lumleys are still going strong here in Westerleigh," Bertha pointed out. "One of the Lumley boys got the Military Medal in Libya last year."

"Nobody ever found out where that cameo brooch went," declared Aunt Susan sternly. "She was wearing it the very day she took to her bed." You might have thought that one of her sisters had it at that moment, wrapped up in tissue-paper in her handbag.

(What has Granny's cameo brooch got to do with young Lumley's Military Medal, mused Danny dimly.)

"It was very mysterious," murmured Angela. "It was a handsome brooch."

The conversation dealt for some time with the subject of the dead lady's possessions, her admirable taste in clothes and ornaments. By what seemed a natural transition, a reference was made to an amber necklace that a friend had bought Angela for her birthday the year before the war.

"We were saying," Susan summarily asserted, "I have never known *any one* make marrow jam the way our mother did. It was a Gilchrist recipe, of course."

(But we were not saying anything of the sort, Danny protested. What's the old woman up to?)

The conversation being thus sharply diverted to the theme of the dead lady's domestic talents, it expounded them for some time. There was a special trifle, the twins recalled with enthusiasm, that their mother had made for them when they were good. Even prunes, it was recalled, were rendered palatable by adding half a cupful of tea from the bottom of the teapot. Then the conversation came back again to the day of the funeral, who had sent wreaths or bouquets, who was there, who was not there. They recalled the clothes everyone wore. Then a remark was made about Angela's dress, a dark grey tweedy thing not ill-cut. Angela admitted the cut was all right, but the material was nothing to write home about, the new utility cloths were poor stuff, but one mustn't grumble, it was the fourth year of the war.

Once again Susan contrived a violent switch in the conversation.

"There was, of course, nothing wrong at all with Jane Howland," Susan pronounced. "It was pure hysteria."

The four younger sisters opened their eyes. They did not seem to have the ghost of an idea who Jane Howland was.

"She might have realized," Susan continued, "we had other

things to think about that day. But the Howlands were all like that."

The Howlands were all like that. Fifty years ago. The Lumleys were ungrateful for the perambulator they had been given. Fifty years ago.

Of course, Danny, don't you see? To-day everything that has happened since then is wiped out. Young Lumley hasn't got the Military Medal in Libya. He isn't born yet. An amber necklace bought a year before the war does not yet exist. Utility cloth does not yet exist. This is Granny's Day, the day she died fifty years ago. To-day Granny is born again.

Martha had long since cleared the turkey away. A trifle had followed, perhaps a tribute to that notable trifle their mother used to have made for them when they had been good. They had all risen and gone across the passage to the drawing-room, where they drank China tea, a present for the occasion from Miss Stanmore, who was probably having some China tea herself in her own room across from Miss Potts's room, a few yards away.

"So nice of her," said Aunt Bertha. "Her own very special tea. *Dear* Miss Stanmore."

Dear Miss Stanmore . . . and no wonder. She had been with Aunt Bertha since the day The Hazels became a Guest House. She was getting on now, of course. She was ninety and not good with stairs any more, so they had fixed a room up for her on the ground floor.

"I thought for a moment," Bertha went on, "of asking Miss Stanmore in for lunch, seeing she's the only one in to-day." She got up and pressed a bell. "Dear Mrs. Newnham, it was so kind of her, wasn't it, to make arrangements until this evening. And Miss Filimore left last week. So I thought we might have Miss Stanmore in with us. And then no, I said to myself, there's something so beautiful about having only us daughters here."

That was a bad one! You could almost hear the crash, as if someone had nudged a cut-glass something off a mantelshelf. Aunt Susan for one instant turned and glared at her nephew. He felt it like a jab from a couple of hatpins. Then the eyes were unaware of him again, as frozen water is of grey sky.

"She likes her rest in the afternoon," Bertha said hurriedly. "She's no trouble at all."

"Yes," murmured Angela. "She's a dear, isn't she?" The door opened. Martha appeared again. Behind her appeared another woman, elderly, like all the others, but a more anxious female than the rest. She was fiddling with her hair as she came in. She had been fiddling with it a great many years before that. In the course of nature it should have been a sober grey, like the hair of these other women. It was, in fact, a fierce henna, shot strangely with hanks of pale gold, a relic of some earlier, and apparently less satisfactory, treatment. The coiffure was in vivid contrast to the

dead black of her dress, which was clearly a mourning garment, it was too frankly funereal to be a uniform. In fact, she was the only woman there in mourning, though it was not the funeral of *her* mother that was being commemorated. She was bedizened not only with that hair, but with several massive pieces of jewellery, a brooch, a pair of long jet earrings, a jet necklace, several rings, two bracelets, as if death—at least a Letford-Gilchrist death, a death at The Hazels—were a thing to be celebrated with due pomp.

Miss Potts. (This, of course, was Miss Potts.) Still another woman. Alice, Martha, Susan, Lavinia, Angela, Bertha, Mona, Edie, Patricia, Eurydice, Carlotta, Elinor. Women human and canine, women dead and alive. Had a man in world's history ever been so engulfed in women before? Achilles, perhaps. But Achilles was on top of the world, he could take it. He had not been spewed out of the Trojan Wars with his guts crammed as full of bugs as a rice-sack with rice.

Women, women, women, women. And all he wanted was one word from one woman, one brief word, and all these multitudes of women, ghosts and bodies, would be scurrying dust in a door-sill.

Yes, it was Miss Potts talking.

"Martha told me . . ." she said in quick nervous catches. "I'm so pleased . . . to see you. You don't look . . . at all well. . . . I'm sorry . . . so sorry . . . that you've not heard from Helen and Edward. . . . I do hope . . . nothing's happened to them."

She had never been a very tactful one, and always an over-decorated one, in the way that hearses are more decorated than delivery carts. But she had always been ready to work, and to work well, for twenty-four hours a day; so you couldn't say anything, really.

They shook hands, she and Danny. An odd woman. Her hand-grip was like a guardman's. She had quite a formidable pair of warts on the chin and upper lip. But the voice was thin and dulcet, almost as if it were an arduously maintained falsetto.

"I've not heard," said Danny. "I'm feeling all right. It's fine to see you."

"The table, Miss Potts, Martha. . . . We're going to have the big silver tray. Will you——"

But there was no necessity for Aunt Bertha to conclude the instruction. The two women were already moving forward from its place against the wall a solid oak table with flaps, which seemed as if it must have been made out of the bulkheads of a battleship. That was the only table in the place that could stand up under the big silver tray. Danny remembered them both.

"May I——" began Danny, and started to his feet.

But the two women had already moved it and put up the flaps. They were as strong as horses. They had to be, at Aunt Bertha's. Aunt Bertha had a swinging scapula, which made it dangerous for

her to do anything herself, other than talk nicely to everybody, and she was good at that.

"No, Danny," his mother said softly. "Take things easily for a time, there's a good boy."

The party settled down for a further spell of elegiac reminiscence into the old easy chairs, their feet resting on the old tuffets, all of which were disposed into a pattern which they had first formed before the memory of man.

The memory of woman, Danny corrected himself. There is no man in the place, excepting me, and as they've already insisted one way and another, I'm a ghost. The dears they don't know how right they are.

The women disposed themselves in the chairs, the well-nourished immemorial women. They had been eating and talking. Now they digested their food and talked. It was an interminable talking, like the monsoon rain, without beginning or middle or end. They talked of women, and above all of one woman, their mother, who had died fifty years ago that day. She had had six daughters. One of those daughters had had daughters. It was a female universe.

They were tired, all of them except Aunt Susan, who had no idea the word tired existed. After all, they were a bunch of old women who had come a long way to get here. They had had a big lunch. They would like to have leaned back in their chairs and had forty winks. But no. Aunt Susan had other ideas. This woman, that woman, one woman above all, in a female universe.

But is it? A sudden twinge of irritation prodded a nerve. Is it only a female universe? Have these six women by some six-fold miracle of parthenogenesis emerged from a virgin womb? Did they have a father? God Almighty, did *I* have a father? But of course I did. I remember him very clearly, though I was only five when he went off to Mexico. I remember the bristly feel of his upper lip and something nice he put on to his face, it must have been some sort of after-shaving lotion. And of course I remember what he was. A gaslight and coke man. How funny they thought it at school! What was *your* dad, Mather? A gaslight and coke man. A coalman? Ha! Ha! Ha! Listen, everybody! Mather's father was a coalman. And he died putting up a gas-container or something on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

And mother never talks of him, though, God knows, I'm sure she was crazy about him. She never talks about her father, either. The same goes for the other sisters. God knows why, these women just won't talk about their husbands and father.

They *must* have had a father, these six. They did not come out cheeping from the broken shells of six eggs. What happened to that old man? Did they ever let him become an old man? Or, when the last female was born, did the seven females, the mother and her brood of six, turn on him and devour him?

Danny to go mooching like a tramp round the countryside with his own aunt's door shut in his face, the door that had opened on him a thousand times during his childhood.

"Danny dear, why don't you lie down a bit in my room?" his Aunt Bertha asked. "You remember the old oak settle. It's up there now. You'll find it very comfortable."

"You look so tired," his mother insisted anxiously. "We won't be very long."

"Oh, where are you going?" asked Danny. But even as he asked the question, the answer came to him. Where would these old women, who had gathered from the furthest corners of England to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of their mother's death—where could they possibly be going excepting to the cemetery where she lay buried, to put flowers on her grave?

His mother gave utterance to the words.

"To lay flowers on mother's grave," she said. Then she followed awkwardly: "I don't know . . . do you think . . . you'd care to come with us, Danny dear? We may be rather a long time, you know . . . and you look *so* tired." (Somehow he felt, tired though he was, most of his toes in the grave though they were, he would be able to hold his own with six not at all young ladies.) "And there's something we want to discuss with the new Vicar. . . . I don't know how much it would interest you. But *do* come, if you'd like to."

He loved his mother very much. He knew she was an intelligent woman. He knew she had asked him purely out of good manners. But he was overwrought. It was all he could do to prevent himself bellowing with laughter straight into her face. That may have been partly because the four dogs, or bitches rather, suddenly intruded themselves in single file through a crevice in his skull. He saw with extraordinary vividness the whole string of females, like a girls' class in Eastbourne, defiling among the graves: Susan at the head, with flowers; Lavinia, Angela, Bertha, Mona, Edie, following, with flowers; Miss Potts, with bracelets and flowers; Martha, with flowers. Patricia, Eurydice, Carlotta, Elinor, sniffing at the gravestones, squatting occasionally; then, finally, himself, the male, at a decorous interval.

He managed to keep down the laughter, as you sometimes manage to keep sea-sickness down.

"No, mother, thanks. I really am a bit tired. I'll stay."

The sigh of relief was quite audible.

"Oh, will you?" asked Aunt Bertha. "Oh, dear. Well, well. But Angela's right. You could do with a rest." For one moment she forgot her dead mother and her living scapula. "You are all right, aren't you, darling?" She searched his eyes almost as if he were Miss Stanmore herself. "You must have had an awfully interesting time out there. I'm dying to hear all about it. You *will* come one week-end soon, and we'll have a real pow-wow."

She talked to him as if he were still four or five, and they were being cowboys and Indians.

"Yes," said Danny. "That'll be fine."

"And I'm sure, dear, there'll be news from Helen and Edward by then, and we'll celebrate." She sounded almost skittish, as if she might then and there bring out a secret drop of gin from a cupboard.

"We ought to be on our way," asserted Aunt Susan. She went out of the room to wash and get her things on. The others followed.

"You can throw that nice coloured rug over you," said Aunt Bertha. "Be a good boy, do put your feet up."

"Good-bye, Danny dear," his mother bade him. "Don't fret. There's going to be news soon. I feel it in my bones."

CHAPTER THREE

DANNY didn't particularly feel like shutting himself up in Aunt Bertha's room. He knew the room of old; and the old oak settle, which was about as hard as the lid of a Crusader's coffin. The room was full of knick-knacks and what-nots. No wonder poor old Martha looked about ninety when she was probably only seventy, having all those knick-knacks and what-nots to keep dusted. There was a picture, too, in the centre of the wall above the fireplace, which always got his goat. It was a painting, a hand-painting, in fact, of a last-war soldier in the act of dying. A blood-stained bandage bound his forehead. A middle-aged lady with a general resemblance to Britannia leaned over him, holding him clasped to her bosom. There was a mountain in the background of the picture, and a fiery red sunset behind the mountain. It wasn't an ordinary mountain. "Look, do you see?" Aunt Bertha never failed to point out," it's shaped like a lion, the Lion of England. You see? Poor Mr. Sims!" She was talking of one of her ex-patients now, not of the lion. (Mr. Sims had been one of the very few male guests ever admitted through the portals of The Hazels. There had been a Miss Sims, an aunt, for whom, if she asked you to do things, you did them.) "He was such a dear, God bless him! He died in my arms, you know. Such a dear! It was about sunset, too, when he died, just like the picture." That must have made up for it, Danny had told himself quite frequently, dying at sunset, and in Aunt Bertha's arms.

Danny opened the door, and shut it behind him; then he went straight up to the picture, without even setting the attaché-case

down. The picture had always had a morbid fascination for him. It was essential to get to grips with it at once, have a bit of a tussle, then it might leave you alone for ten minutes.

"Yes, yes," he told himself. "I've often thought how much the dame looks like Aunt Bertha. But I've never noticed before how much the dying soldier looks like me. I only hope my eyes won't be as bloodshot as that when I'm for it."

He turned his back on the picture, and went and stretched his legs out on the old oak settle. He didn't want any rug. There he remained for two or three minutes, but the settle was so hard it got him at the back of the ankles, and he thought it better to sit up. That did not greatly improve matters, for the back of the settle got him in the spine instead. It was really very uncomfortable.

The house felt curiously empty, though he was aware there were others in the house beside himself. There was, for instance, the eminent Miss Stanmore, wrapped round in her decades as in so many shawls, down in her bed-sitting-room. Such an old dear she was, she had a heart of gold, and next to no trouble at all. She had had her lunch, and she would sleep peacefully away till she had her tea-time glass of milk brought to her.

Yes, dear Miss Stanmore was asleep, and old Mrs. Newnham, who probably occupied the other front bedroom just across the landing, was out, having awfully kindly "made arrangements". And Miss Filimore, whoever she was, had left last week, and Miss Pinthrop was not coming till next week. It had all turned out very nicely.

The Pekinese were probably down there, too, presumably still in their baskets. They would not really have been allowed to accompany the other ladies to the cemetery. And very probably Martha was at the sink, washing up the luncheon things. Yet despite all that the house was empty, damned empty, like a bird's egg that a weasel has sucked dry.

It wasn't the presence or absence of elderly ladies with or without stomach-aches that made the house feel empty. It was inside him, an emptiness with claws. The thing had started clawing the minute they had left the bungalow in Kuala Lumpur, in Dick Copley's convoy of cars headed for Seremban and the South. It was only just a bit of a nagging at first, during that day, and the night and day after that. Besides, he had had a great many other things to think about during those thirty-six hours. Then the old gardener had come up with the tale of what had happened, and since then the claws had been busy, thrusting and turning and tearing.

He got up from the oak settle, and tried to do a turn or two around the room. That wasn't easy, there was too much stuff about, work-baskets on tripods and fumed oak tables and things. Besides, whichever way you turned there was the Lion of England and Bertha Britannia and the dying soldier with bloodshot eyes. He sat down on the settle again, his eyes turned away from the Lion.

He could not sit still. The claws of the loneliness opened and stretched, closed and opened again. It would have made things easier if he had been able to talk it all over with somebody. But he hadn't. They'd been in a sort of conspiracy, those six women downstairs. Even his mother had been on the other side of a barrier. He and she had not even touched finger-tips.

He got up. He'd go out. Perhaps he'd wander over to the Barleycorn and have a drink and a yarn with somebody, whatever the aunts would say about hobnobbing with the yokels. He looked at his watch. It was after three. Oh, damn, the pub would be shut. Oh, well, Westerleigh wasn't the Gobi Desert. There would be people about. Then, as he descended the stairs, he heard a noise from the kitchen, a plate or something slipping from greasy hands into a sink.

"Good Lord!" he said to himself. "Old Martha! I haven't really said how do you do to her. I ought to while I have the chance. She's a good old stick." He turned and went along the passage towards the kitchen and threw the door open.

"Hi, Martha, old dear!" he cried. "Breaking up the house and home?" The old woman was bowed over the sink, in an attitude, it seemed, of the utmost dejection. She turned. Her face was alight with incredulous pleasure.

"Oh, Master Danny," she said. "You wouldn't believe it! It didn't!"

"What didn't? Didn't what?"

"It slipped out of my hands, and it didn't!"

"Isn't that wonderful!" he said. "You always were a lucky one, Martha!"

"Oh, don't go talking like that now!" she said, lifting her fingers from the soapy water of the washing-up bowl, and touching wood on the draining-board. "If you'll wait a minute or two, I'll get you an early cup of tea. How would you like that now? Shall I bring it to you up in Miss Letford's room?"

He suddenly determined the only way they would ever bring him back to Aunt Bertha's room would be on a stretcher. How cosy it was in here, with the steam rising from the sink, and the rosy dinner-service up there in the big dresser, and the old rocking-chair with the cushion of coloured wools!

"I'm staying right here," he told her. "I'm going to help you dry the things. Like I used to when I was a kid," he added, with a faint note of pathos, in case she was going to be difficult. He could not, in fact, remember whether he had ever actually held a tea-cloth in his hand. He was not that sort of man, and had not been that sort of a boy. But he was lonely. He wanted company. And Martha was a good deal more agreeable company than a good many elderly women he knew.

He placed his attaché-case on the dresser and came over to the sink.

"Oh, go away now, Master Danny," she requested him. Her tone was quite skittish. The plate that didn't had altered for her the whole texture of her universe. "Besides, whatever will Miss Letford say?"

He ignored that.

"Not that you deserve it," he reproached her. He pulled a dry tea-cloth down from the rack, feeling pretty certain that was the right implement. "Wouldn't even let her old Danny into the house after he had come all that long way."

"Oh, Master Danny," she cried. "You shouldn't say that!" She had taken that to heart. He saw the upper lip trembling quite distressingly.

"Martha dear, I was only kidding. Honestly I was. I know it's a very special day. And you had your orders."

"Yes. And I didn't know it was you, Master Danny. I didn't, did I?"

"Of course you didn't," he assured her. "How am I shaping? Not bad, eh?" In mass terms of output he was not doing very well, but the quality was excellent. It was only his second plate, but he was polishing away at it like a coster polishing an apple. "You see what early training does for you? If Helen could see me now——"

The sentence broke off between his teeth like a chip of bone-dry wood; it was as if his mouth were suddenly full of sawdust. He turned his head away.

There was silence for some time, for half a minute maybe. The mop the old woman held in her right hand, the plate she held in her left, hung suspended over the basin. She seemed to be communing with herself. She was Martha, the old maid-of-all-work. The young man was Master Danny, Matron's nephew. She had known him as a small boy, very like the small boy lost somewhere on the other side of the world. They had been great friends once, in so far as that was feasible between kitchen and drawing-room. But he was a grown gentleman now, high up in government work.

Could she talk to him, straight out of her heart to his? Oh, she could He looked so lonely. No, it was he that must do the talking It seemed all inside him still, he was stuffed up with it. He had been with his mother and with his five aunts for some hours now, yet it was still all with him. Of course the ladies were full of the other thing. That's what they'd arranged the day for, with so much trouble to everybody. So they hadn't got round to Master Danny yet, not even his mother hadn't. That's what it looked like. Poor boy! You would think his heart was breaking.

"Master Danny, Master Danny!" she said at length. "How my heart grieves for you!" She let the plate she held slide back into the basin again, and clasped her left hand round the back of his

right. "Don't take on so, Master Danny God will be good to you. Have faith in Him."

He kept his face turned from her. Perhaps it was because there was a mist over his eyes.

"If only I had something to catch on to,' he said. "But it's all so puzzling. Nothing hangs together."

"I don't want to be taking liberties," the old woman said, "but perhaps you would like to tell me about it. It sometimes helps, doesn't it, when you get things off your chest? No, dear, no. Don't worry about the drying-up." (He was mechanically rubbing away at the back of a plate that, if it was not dry now, would never be.) "Yes, put the cloth down. Won't you come over here now, and sit on the rocking-chair? Like you used to, often, in the old days. That's fine. I'll sit by you on the sofa. Now tell me, will you, Master Danny?"

And he told her about Helen and Edward.

CHAPTER FOUR

HELEN and Danny Mather were kept awake quite a lot later than usual that night. It was the night of December the seventh, nineteen hundred and forty-one. In fact it was the morning of December the eighth before they had dropped off to sleep. There was an unusually large amount of traffic that night moving up from the centre of Kuala Lumpur along Ampang Road, the broad residential road where their bungalow was.

In fact it was only a coincidence. What could they have known about anything, in points south of Kuala Lumpur, when they knew nothing in Hawaii, and still less, if possible, in Washington? It was a coincidence, but there was the deuce of a lot of traffic that night and it kept the Mathers awake till after midnight. And then a bugle-call sounded—it must have been two or three hours later. It came from a barracks, obviously, some distance away, too. The air was unusually clear that night, and sounds travelled well.

"But that's the alarm," Danny Mather told himself. (He realized he had not really gone off to sleep at all.) "That can only mean one thing. It's come! Ah, well! I hope Helen hasn't heard it. She'll learn about it quick enough! No, I don't think she has. She seems nice and quiet." He changed his position with great care, so as not to awaken her, and in the hope he might now at last go off.

But she was not asleep. She had heard.

"That was the alarm, darling, wasn't it?"

"Yes, darling."

"I suppose we're at war with the Japs."

"I think that's very likely."

"It had to come, hadn't it?"

"I don't think there was anything else for it."

"Well. darling, go to sleep, will you? You mustn't miss your rest."

"No, dear." He raised himself and moved his mouth towards her dim face and kissed her. "Good night, darling. Everything will be all right."

"Of course it will. Good night, darling."

The minutes passed. A half-hour passed. The mysterious cavalcade went rumbling along. A dog barked up the road somewhere. From her kennel out in the garden Susie the chow barked again. (They had called her Susie because it was held she strongly resembled Susan, the eldest aunt.) Up in the ceiling a *chichak* cheeped prettily. The moths and flying beetles thudded from time to time against the wire screens of the windows.

"Toc-toc-toc-toc!" went a night-jar down the road somewhere. "Toc-toc-toc!" he continued without remission. "Toc!" Then he stopped.

"Eighteen!" murmured Helen. "I gave him not less than twenty. I owed myself a dollar!"

"Twenty I counted," Danny corrected her. "You're quits."

No, neither of them had fallen asleep. It wasn't only the toc-toc bird that kept them from sleeping.

"Danny, darling!" she said a few moments later.

"Yes, dear?"

"It's the eighth, of course, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear."

"Edward isn't due back for the holidays till to-morrow."

"No, darling."

"Do you mind if I go up to Fraser's Hill and bring him back to-day? You won't think I'm panicky or anything?"

"Of course not. I suppose the other mothers will be doing the same thing."

"It'll just feel cosier with Edward back at home."

"Yes, dear. You must sleep now."

"Yes, dear. I will."

She turned round and was asleep. He, too, was sleeping a minute or two later.

Everything will be all right.

It wasn't, of course. You straightened your tie, and there were the Japs on your own side of the border, in possession of the aerodrome at Khota Baru. There weren't many aeroplanes there, but there might have been, almost any day. You took a deep

breath . . . and there were the great proud ships, the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*, under the sea. It was like a punch to the heart. You recovered, but nothing was the same after that. Then the Japs began crawling in, like things that move when a stone is lifted and there seems no way at all of stopping them. You kill a few, you kill a lot, but there are plenty more where they came from. They were amphibious, too, like water-beetles. Nothing stopped them. They were almost at once over on the west side of the peninsula. They were all over the State of Kedah now.

Then Penang fell.

"Penang!" repeated Helen. "I got a letter from Sheila Morrison only a couple of days ago. She said what a nuisance it was. She had just got all her etchings framed and hung in the sitting-room . . . you remember those jolly Muirhead Bones and Leon Underwoods they've been collecting? . . . and now the war's broken out, she supposed she'd have to take them all down again. Poor Sheila!"

"Do you know what they're saying? I can't believe it! It's enemy propaganda! They say our people just cleared out and left everyone else to take what was coming to them. It can't be true, darling! And that they were in such a hurry they left everything to be collared by the Japs, the oil and the rubber, everything. They didn't do a damn thing to the radio station, either! They must have gone mad!"

"Oh, darling, it's silly! You know how people talk! I shouldn't be surprised if the Morrisons turn up here. We'd better get Chiang Weh to get the room ready, in case. Chiang Weh!" she called out. Chiang Weh appeared. "Get the spare room ready, will you? Friends, they come any minute, maybe. Quick, please."

"Helen, darling! I want to ask you something. Wouldn't it be more sensible if you just took a trip to Singapore for a few weeks, till it's all over, you and Edward?"

"My *dear*, you don't think they'll ever get so far as this, do you? You know you don't, you said so yourself half an hour ago. No, darling, we mustn't panic. We must set an example. Don't you think so? Supposing people *did* behave badly in Penang, is that any reason why we should go to pieces in K.L.? I would like a *little* one, my sweet, wouldn't you? Chiang Weh!" she called out.

Penang fell on December the nineteenth. Ipoh fell ten days later. Good God, Ipoh! A hundred miles up the road as the crow flies, if that!

"Helen, what about it?" he asked miserably. "Isn't it about time you threw together a few things and went off? It mayn't be for long," he added. There was not the least conviction in his voice. "Bill Masterson rang me up at the office to-day. He said Emily and the kids are off to-morrow. So are the Wainwrights."

"Yes, Emily rang me up, too. But what's the good of going to Singapore, darling? You can always go to Singapore if you've *got* to. Singapore will always be *there*. It's as safe as houses."

He grimaced.

"Houses! That's one thing that isn't safe in Singapore! Did I tell you the Owens have been bombed out? And poor old Andrews, you know, the policeman. Tough luck on that little girl he married. She's expecting the youngster in a week or two."

"What did I tell you, Danny dear? It's not been anything like so bad here, has it, except for that one nasty raid."

"Poor old 'Spotted Dog'!" he mourned. "Perhaps you're right! I suppose it's safer here, for the time being anyhow. And Edward might as well have the garden to run around in, as long as it's there. Hi, Edward!" he called out through the open window into the garden. It was a pleasant garden, hedged in with albizzias and casuarinas, mounded with azaleas, hibiscus glowing with tongues of fire at the edge of the tiny pool, and the dark green lawn as smooth as if the place were Wimbledon, and war was a thing that happened only at places called Passchendaele or Hazebrouck.

"Hi, Edward!" called out Danny suddenly. "Leave Susan's tail alone! It'll come off if you're not careful!"

"It's the joy-stick of my airyplane!" the young man said primly. "I'm dive-bombing!"

"Now, listen, Helen, you've got to listen to me! I'm scared. Yes, I don't mind telling you. Our line is falling back all the time, nearer and nearer to K.L. There isn't any line. The Japs are landing whole boatloads all along the coast, here on the west, as well as driving in from the north and east. They're all over the place, in front of us, behind us, in the creeks, in the jungle. They're in the estates and towns all togged up as Malays, you never know——" He looked out through the window at that moment as if to make sure some Jap hadn't done away with their faithful *kebun*, the gardener, and hidden himself under his broad-brimmed hat. "*Kebun!*" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Don't let *tuan kechi* touch that tennis-ball! They're dropping high-explosive bombs," he explained to Helen, "that look like tennis-balls. No, Helen, no! I really can't stand it! Every time I'm away from home, and there's an alert, I worry myself sick! I can't stand it! In any case the authorities want you to go! How long is it since they asked all the women and children to clear out? Last Friday, wasn't it? You'll have to go, if only for Edward's sake. Why don't you answer? What are you thinking of, Helen?"

"I was thinking, darling. It's awfully funny, really. When the war broke out, and you cabled me . . . I don't think I ever told you . . . well, of course, I had to come. But I felt such a *worm* leaving them all to face it, my mother and dad and your mother and

everybody, I felt so awful. Of course, I knew my job was to be with you. But it seemed so mean coming out to the peace and the safety . . . what's that line of poetry? Something about the apples and the singing and the gold. . . . Tennyson's *Lotus-Eaters*, is it? . . . well, darling, it's turned out rather odd, one way or another. Certainly not terribly peaceful."

"And not so very safe, either. He'd better come in, darling. That's gunfire. There's probably a raider about. Edward, I want you to come in! I bet you can't make Exeter Cathedral in twenty minutes!"

"In a way it was Edward I really felt sick about. I mean, all the other little boys would have been through it, while he was away from it all, all safe and sound wrapped up in cotton-wool. I often used to think . . . will he be able to look other boys in the face when he grows up? Well, we don't have to worry now."

A day or two later.

"If *you* go darling, I go. Why did I come back to Malaya in the first place?"

"But you *know* I can't come. I've got to stay here and do my stuff. I'll come along later. Perhaps we'll be able to hang on, after all, though it doesn't seem too likely. There's been a spot of nonsense up there on the Slim River, and it went pretty badly for us. They crashed through with a whole herd of tanks. Things are not looking at all bright."

"If I were to go off and leave you behind. . . ." She did not complete the sentence. Her eyes were blue, flecked with grey patches. When her voice became sombre, as it was now, the blueness went out of her eyes. They were like grey pools on a cloudy day. "I don't think you understand, darling. In the first place I hate not being where you are. It makes me feel funny inside here. And I hate it for your sake, too. I mean there's not much I can do about the old tummy, but I'm the only one that can do anything at all."

"But, darling——"

"Yes, I know. Edward. It's the same with him. I think we're both better off near you than away from you."

"If there were only you, Helen, I'd leave it entirely to you. But you see, with him . . ." He was silent. He could argue with her no more urgently than that.

Her mind sought to switch away from the issue, not very successfully.

"Winnie Appleby says she's going to stay put, twins or no twins," she announced. "They can cut her up into small dice, she doesn't care a damn, her place is with John!"

"When did you talk to her, darling?"

"Just before tiffin."

"I talked to John an hour ago. I talked to Winnie ten minutes

later. She's not going to stay put. She's going. She said she can't stand this damn curfew one more night."

"She's going, is she?"

"You can still get a decent hand of bridge after dinner at Raffles, she said, and she's not going to let any bloody Japs get in the way of her bridge. She's stark, staring mad, of course. You never know where she is from one minute to the other."

"She can go." Her lip set sullenly.

"I want you to realize this, darling." He spoke very deliberately. "If the authorities at Singapore order the women and kids to evacuate, there'll be a bit of a scramble at the shipping-offices and docks, there's bound to be. I'd much rather you were on the spot."

"And you?"

"The moment His Nibs tells me to clear out, I'll clear out. There'll be a hell of a lot to do in Singapore. There is already. They've shot the civil aerodrome to pieces. I may have the job of keeping that in going order. His Nibs was saying something about that yesterday."

She was silent for some time. She knew the issue had been decided. There was no good going on about it any longer.

"When do you want us to go?" she asked at length.

"To-morrow morning at the crack of dawn. It's all arranged." He looked a trifle uncomfortable. He was not normally one for pushing ready-made situations on people, least of all on Helen, with whom it was always fun to talk things over. "Osman's in the garage now giving the old Austin a once-over. We thought it better if you tried to keep together; though the roads are very crowded, of course, and you might get split up now and again. So we've fixed the meeting-place at the Copleys' house in Imbi Road."

"I don't follow. Who's we?"

"Well, Bill Copley has got orders from his firm to clear out. He'll be there, with Betty and the infant. And Winnie Appleby and the Twins. And the Mortimers. And you and Edward and . . . I forget now. . . . Oh, yes, Lilian and the Blakeleys. You'll be a sort of convoy, you know; jolly useful in case of a breakdown or anything. You can stuff quite a few suitcases in the trunk and in the back of the car."

"And the house?"

"Oh, the house will be all right. I'll be here, for a time anyhow. If I have to go off, the boys will look after everything . . . till we're back again to take over."

"Yes, of course," she agreed. But she knew as well as he did that it was all lost, all lost, excepting for the few oddments she could stow away into suitcases. There was no house any more, no coloured lino-cuts, none of that jolly pewter she used to scout round for in the Caledonian market, no glass-topped cocktail tables, no rocking-horse for Edward, no tricycle, no flower-beds, no pool with

lilies, all lost. "Well, my dear, that's that," she said. She rose from her chair, went up to him and kissed him. Then she sat down again and reached for a lump of pale-blue knitting which she had hoped would some day be a pullover for Edward. Then she put it down again. "Perhaps I ought to get my bits and pieces together," she said. "What's that?" There was a dull boom from somewhere on the western fringe of the town.

"It might be a bomb, of course. But I think we've started blowing things up. I'm damn sure we'll make a better job of it than they did up in Penang. Look at that column of black smoke over there. Do you see? Just to the left of the Leadleys' roof. A nice drop of rubber, that was. Yes, darling, it's about time you went."

"Don't let Ah Boon make the curries too hot," she requested. "You know they're not good for you."

It was rather a situation. At the last moment young Edward insisted on having his tricycle packed into the back of the car. He was bearing up extremely well. There was no doubt at all he knew that this departure from home was not like the other departures his brief life had already involved. He was handling his mother as if he felt she had been entrusted to his charge for the period of this latest separation from his father. He was looking a bit starry-eyed, as children do on the verge of tears, but he was sternly keeping the tears back.

But the tricycle was a different thing. Perhaps it symbolized for him everything he knew he was going to lose: Susie the chow, his old amah, who still came to see him every Tuesday evening, his wigwam in the garden, his school and schoolmates up at Fraser's Hill, the nut toffee Ah Boon secretly cooked for him, his jigsaw Exeter Cathedral, his Meccano set. It suddenly became impossible not to have his tricycle with him, and you could see with half an eye that if it was withheld, all was lost. The tears would rush into the starry eyes, he would howl his head off. There was nothing for it. Osman—he was the *syce*, the chauffeur—had to get to work on the back of the car and find room somehow for the tricycle. At the same moment, and perhaps because of a similar psychological compulsion, Helen's mind ran like a flare of lightning to the sitting-room clock that someone had given her for a wedding-present. She couldn't quite remember who it was, and it wasn't a particularly beautiful clock, but she knew she had to have it, every bit as much as Edward had to have that tricycle.

It was too silly to talk about, so she got out of the car and went back into the house to fetch it. She seized it and looked round. She wasn't looking round to bid a mental good-bye to things, she had done that already. She looked round for something to pack the clock in. An irrelevant guest-towel had somehow wandered in from a bathroom and lay across the back of a chair. She picked it up, wrapped the clock in it, and went out to the porch.

"Beg your pardon, darling!" That was Danny. Danny had very nearly knocked her down as he came charging up from the drive into the house. Everybody was having last-minute brain-waves, apparently. She went back to the seat of the car. She was driving, of course. There was no point in taking the *syce* with them. A minute or two later Danny was out again. He held in his hand the small attaché-case Helen had bought for him a couple of birthdays ago at Robinson's. He was rather breathless.

"I think there's room, darling," he said, stowing the bag under the axle of the tricycle. "Just a few things, to make sure I've got them when we join up again at Singapore. You know, pyjamas, slippers, a razor—*you* know. "There was also a double photograph-case, with Helen and Edward on each side under a mica shield, which always stood on the top of his desk beside his pipe-rack. The thing had caught his eye at the last moment, so he had stuffed it away between the pyjamas and the spare shirt. He didn't mention it, of course. That would have been rather sloppy.

Helen and Edward were both nice and comfortable now in front of the car.

"Good-bye, old chap," he said. "Look after mummy, won't you?"

Things were too much at that moment for the starry eyes, but they managed to behave themselves.

"Good-bye, daddy," the young man said, perhaps a trifle hoarsely.

"Good-bye, Helen darling. See you soon."

"Good-bye, Danny darling."

She got into gear, and the car moved off down the drive.

Helen and Edward waved, he waved; then, as the car turned out of the driveway into the road, he, too, turned and went back into the house. They had arranged to send along a car from the office, seeing that he would not have the use of his own car for the time being. The car would be along very soon now. There was going to be a lot doing up and around Kuala Lumpur for the next day or two; he was going to be very busy.

Danny Mather was, of course, enrolled in the local unit of the Federated Malay States Volunteer Force, like most of his colleagues in the Public Works Department, and before the war broke out his military activities gave considerable pleasure to his young son and heir. But, after, he was given quickly to understand that he would have to keep his nose down to his job with the other key men. Yes, there was a lot doing up and around K.L. during the day or two after his wife's departure. The C.O. of the sapper unit that had fallen back on Kuala Lumpur wasn't leaving anything to chance. Neither was Danny's own chief, "His Nibs", as they all called him at P.W.D. headquarters.

So Danny got busy. He was going off on pretty dangerous

work. There was quite a fair chance he might not come back. Therefore there had to be some sort of understanding with the house staff. He didn't expect any heroics. The cook and the house-boy were Chinese, that is to say realists. They had as much guts as the next man, but he knew if things were getting sticky they would make off with as big a bundle as they could carry. The same probably went for the *syce* chauffeur, and the *kebun*, who were Malays. The *syce* was a daredevil behind the wheel of a car, but a bit of a mouse everywhere else. The *kebun* was an old man. There was no reason to suppose that, armed with a trowel, he would take up his post on the verandah of his employers' house, in order to protect their furniture and linen with the last drop of his blood.

So Danny issued his instructions. As soon as there was no doubt the Japanese were coming through into K.L., they must bring in their families and their pals and divide things up nicely between them. Whatever they couldn't cart off, would they please smash or burn. He would rather the Japanese didn't use their dinner-set and sleep in their beds. They must look after Susie, too. She would grieve if she was left behind. Would somebody please take her along, or do her in, if the worst came to the worst?

That took care of his own business. Then he got going on the work of his King-Emperor. First he took in as many of the big rubber estates as he had time for. There was very little you could do about destroying the rubber trees themselves. That would take about as much time as it had taken to grow them. But he made certain that the raw rubber stocks had gone up in smoke and that the engines providing power for the processing plants were smashed up good and proper. He also attended to the tin dredges in the region, which their engineers had been ordered to destroy, by removing and smashing up their vital parts, then taking out the cocks and sinking them in the pools, or "paddocks", they floated in. It all had its painful side to Danny, who was rather a tidy person himself, and felt it like something in a hollow tooth when a bolt misbehaved in a piece of machinery.

He had three days of it, with the Japs drawing nearer and nearer along a network of good roads which nobody had been able to do much about, the momentum of their advance southward having increased so rapidly since their victory at the Slim River. They were not only ahead of you, but groups of their scouts might well be on either side or close behind. Looking like anything between a coolie and a bunch of leaves, they were not very palpable to the eye. The result was you never quite knew, when you brought off a job, whether you were going to survive it for long; for as likely as not the sound of the explosion might bring a bunch of Japs hotfoot on to the back of your neck. They had cars, motor-bicycles, ordinary bicycles, and that network of awfully nice asphalt roads to use them on. It was all quite exciting.

But Danny got his big job on the third day, the eleventh.

General Wavell had arrived at the front—using the familiar but not very accurate word—on the ninth, the day after the Slim River business. He had ordered the retreat of the entire British forces in North Malaya to the Johore line some hundred and twenty miles south, for he realized that to hang on was to court a major disaster. The retreat began on the tenth, and nobody liked it much. What made it worse was that, as was clear to any but the most addled or the most romantic, there was nothing else for it. So the army rolled southward, plenty of it, plenty of trucks, lorries, carriers, private cars; there was even a herd of steamrollers and a couple of bright fire-engines that insisted on making their getaway. It was necessary to keep the main road in good shape for as long a time as possible till the army didn't need it any more; then, at the right moment, and as thoroughly as possible, make a mess of it.

Danny had just completed a job near Serendah when a dispatch-rider from Kuala Lumpur came through with the order that the Serau bridge was to be blown up a few miles south of Kuala Kubu, where it carried the road on massive concrete abutments across a one-time water-course. This was in the early afternoon of Sunday, the eleventh. There was no time to waste, and he wanted none. He made off with his three thirty-hundredweight lorries, the first carrying himself and his gang, the second his compressor and pneumatic drills, the third his load of explosives. He was pleased about his gang. His Nibs hadn't been quite sure where he would get his men from, as most of the Tamils seemed to be having a bean-feast in the town, helping themselves to anything they had a fancy to in the big shops, and a good many of the Chinese and Malays had faded away into the surrounding hills. They were managing to get a great deal of liquor, too, even though the authorities had sent the Volunteers round with sledge-hammers to smash all the cases of gin and whiskey they could lay hands on. But it was all right. The word somehow went round that *tuan* Mather needed a gang to do a bit of breaking up, and in no time there they were in the P.W.D. yard, grinning a bit sheepishly and looking as if what they had been up to wasn't anybody's business. There were rather less than thirty of them all told, not too many for the work in hand, particularly as it had to be done in quick time, but he felt they would make it. His Nibs had managed to scrounge for him from a major in the Leicesters a Bren gun and a few rifles, and that helped out nicely, Danny thought. That same morning he had picked up on the edge of a paddy-field three bedraggled-looking East Surreys, a corporal and two privates, who had been in the fighting way up in the Kedah sector, and had been hard at it ever since, three weeks of tough going. Finally, when all their unit was wiped out, they had set off on their own, swimming across slimy creeks, and tearing their way through spiny jungle. And here they were, not at all in good shape; but when they found out what Danny was up to, they asked could they come on, too, and give a hand. Of course, he said. He

could let them have some nice bully, too, and half a bottle of Scotch.

It was a complicated job, and everybody had to get going in double quick time, for the advance Jap body was hardly more than a score of miles away on the main road. The Japs were not having much difficulty either with the slender ambush parties that had been left behind to try and hold up their advance, or with the rather sketchy demolitions that were all the sappers had been able to bring off. It was now up to Danny to keep the road clear as long as possible for the withdrawal of our own last tattered units, then blow the thing sky-high at what he judged the right moment. It had all to be done somehow without attracting undue attention from the Japanese planes that were nosing around up there.

He surveyed the ground. It was not bad. The road up to the bridge and beyond ran through a rubber estate. The trees themselves made something of a hide for the lorries, and there were a couple of attap sheds at about the right distance away, some two hundred yards. The lorry with the explosives and detonators had to be at least as far as that, though it meant adding a lot to the work, for the stuff would all have to be carried along the road and down the slope to the supports of the bridge. If the detonators were any nearer, an unlucky hit from a Jap gun from among the trees, or even a couple of tracers from a Zero that had managed to spot what was going on, might blow everything and everybody to blazes. He backed into the sheds at once, with the bonnets slewed round, in case the getaway had to be made in quick time. He brought the lorry with the compressor as close to the bridge as he could, to make the job as easy as possible for the pneumatic drills. Then he got to work.

First, he detailed three of the Malay boys to go snooping round on patrol to watch for infiltrators, and left another couple on guard at the lorries. Then he unhitched the drills and had them carried down the slope to the abutments. It didn't make things easier that the slope was as slippery as a greased pole. The two teams of drillers, four in each, got into position. He gave the signal to the men at the compressor to crank up, and the drills started grinding.

That was going to be the largest part of the job. In the meantime there were one or two other little things to attend to. He sent the corporal of the East Surreys and one of the privates forward up the further side of the bridge to cover the left flank of the operation with the Bren gun. Bill was the corporal's name, and 'Arry the private's. That was all he learned, and ever was to learn, concerning those two young men. He learned a little more concerning the third, for this third young man made the return journey with him to Kuala Lumpur. This young man's name was Tom, he came from Deptford, and his girl's name was Ida. Danny was doubtless given further data, but at the time he was not in a very receptive mood. So Bill and 'Arry went forward on the left with the Bren gun, and

Tom, accompanied by one Mahmud, went forward with a couple of rifles on the right. The military dispositions being thus achieved, he sent four boys well forward beyond the bridge to blast a good-sized crater in the road, so as to postpone the access of at least the enemy's wheeled stuff, in case they came up before the job was brought off. A stray motor-cyclist was impounded to drive north as far as possible to request our own rearward vehicles to put on their last ounce of speed while the going across the bridge was still good.

It was all quite lively, though a certain tension developed as the job went on. There was the noise of hand drilling forward and pneumatic drilling down below. There was an occasional derisive hoot from a military lorry as it went by, and now and again a wise-crack from a young man who looked rather more dead than alive.

" 'Ow abaht diggin' us up a nice blue-eyed blonde?" asked one. His shirt had been torn to shreds by some near explosion.

"Oo, Mr. Dentist!" exclaimed another, whose eyes were blood-red with fatigue. "That's the wrong toof you're diggin' into!"

There was not much time to bandy pleasantries, hardly time enough to wave the hand in reply.

"All clear, *tuan*!" a boy shouted from way forward.

"Come back!" Danny shouted. If there were still any of our own vehicles to turn up, they were out of luck. "Come back, now!" The boy was back. "Run, the rest of you!" The other boys ran. He followed, and threw himself down in the ditch by the roadside. The battery and the battery-lever in his hand looked all right. "Now!" He depressed and twisted the lever. A moment later a beautiful lump of road went hurtling into the air, making a beautiful noise. The boys got up from the ditch and clapped their hands. They loved beautiful noises. "Now we'll carry on with the big job!" said Danny.

The boys had been getting on nicely with the drilling of the holes in the abutments and the unloading of the tins of ammonal from the lorry. But not nicely enough.

"Get going!" commanded Danny. "Is this a wedding?" A rifle spat sharply forward on the right flank. Then it spat again. The boys went on with their jobs. The rifle was silent for a time. There was nothing to see, you could only feel that a new smell had come into the air, and it was something other than the gases the explosion had left behind.

Once or twice a drill broke off sharp in the hole it was making. You tend to hold your drill a little crooked when you feel you might get a bullet in the back of your neck any moment.

"O.K.!" Danny exclaimed quietly. He was everywhere all the time. "Here's another!" In a moment or two the broken piece was out of the slot, a fresh one in, and the drill was throbbing away again in the tough belly of the concrete.

"Fine!" he said at last. Into each abutment he had drilled two

holes, six feet deep, twelve inches from each other. Then he packed one hole in each with gelignite, then set it off. Then he did the same with the second hole in each. He now had a deep chamber in each abutment, roughly two feet in diameter.

"Good show!" he told himself. Colour was burning brightly in his sallow cheeks. "I wonder what she's doing now?" he found himself asking. It was as if somebody had mentioned Helen's name. But nobody had mentioned her name.

"Pack!" he ordered. The boys got to work with the twenty-five-pound tins of ammonal that lay dumped about their feet.

Of course, underneath he was thinking of her all the time; there was never an instant when he wasn't thinking of her, however loud the racket, however close the danger.

But somebody *had* mentioned her name, hadn't they? He was hearing things. Who?

Then he realized what had been going on. It had been going on for a second or two at most, but there it was. It was a darn butterfly, sitting on a sprig of something on the slope here, at the level of his eyes. But it was not with his eye that he had seen it, at least not at first. His eye had too many other things to do. He had seen it with his mind, had attached its name to it.

The Black and White Helen, that was the name of the fellow. He had a Red Helen in his collection, but not a Black and White Helen. You can't catch a butterfly by sprinkling ammonal on its tail. "Well in!" he shouted, stooping, handing a tin to the boy beside him, stooping, rising again. "Funny how the kid insisted on lugging along the old tricycle! I wonder if——"

He stopped and threw his head back. A new pop-pop-pop suddenly started peppering the ear-drums. Oh, yes, it was the Bren gun on the left flank forward.

"As quick as you can, Ahmud!" Danny shouted. "We might get through with it," he thought, "or we might not. Anyhow, we're having a damn good try!" The stuff was all loaded into the chambers now in both abutments, and tamped down. Only one tin of ammonal remained exposed in each cavity.

"All ready, *tuan*!" Ahmud proclaimed from across the gully.

"Fine! With you in one moment!" He removed the lid of the tin and thrust in the wad of gun-cotton that was to set all the rest sky-rocketing. The Bren gun was barking furiously. Would they be able to hold them up, Bill and 'Arry?

'Ave a go, Bill! Straight left, 'Arry!

Funny, the way things get twisted and tangled in your mind. Here we are, smashing up a bridge in Malaya on the road between Kuala Lumpur and Kuala Kubu. And we're also in the Paddington Baths, as far as I can make out, where the little six-rounders square up to each other on Wednesday nights regularly as clockwork. (We never let a leave go by without doing a couple of the old Wednesday nights at the Paddington Baths.) Listen to the Padding-

to.. boys, the "saveloys", roaring to their local heroes out of the green-grey branches of the rubber trees.

'It 'im wiv yer left, Bill! 'Ave a go, 'Arry!

He scrambled down the north side of the gully, across the muddy seepage in the bed, over to the south abutment, over from the borough of Paddington to the State of Selangor. Yes, the gun-cotton was rammed in all right. Now cover it all, just leaving room for the detonator. Pup-pup-pup! went the Bren gun. Crack! went the rifle. Bill and 'Arry were 'avin' a go, right enough.

"Flex ready, *tuan*!"

They had uncoiled the flex from the drum way back on the road and brought it down the slope to him

"Other piece, Ahmud!"

He went back forty yards, stripped the flex at that point, and twisted the other piece into it. The flex had three terminals now, two to be fixed to the detonators when he had rammed these home in the gun-cotton, one to be fixed into the battery.

It's nothing of a job, but it's got to be properly done, or it might as well be a Meccano set you've been playing with all the time, for all the damage you'll do. I must say (he observed) the old fingers are behaving themselves nicely. I must say, so are young Edward's, when he gets going on his Meccano set. He'll make a good engineer one of these days

A pity about the old bridge. He looked up briefly from his finger-tips to consider it, to get the sense of its efficiency, its line, the toughness of its fibre. Somebody was tugging at his shorts from behind. Oh, no, something had grazed him as it was taken by. His Nibs had made a good job of that bridge. Damn it, somebody *was* tugging at the back of his shorts. Why the hell couldn't they talk?

"For God's sake!" Danny shouted. "What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?"

One of the boys wanted something, damn his eyes. Nice time to be wanting something! The unseen finger stopped tugging. His own fingers worked away steadily, swiftly.

The Bren gun's stopped. It's stopped, I tell you! We won't get through with it! Oh, no, thank God, there it is again! Good old Bill! What? It's stopped again!

Then he heard a voice, a quavering, frightened, frightening voice.

"*Tuan* Mather. *Tuan* Mather! Let me be forgiven! I have news!"

This was not one of his boys speaking, it was much too old a voice. He turned his head. The man who spoke was the *orang kebun*, the man of the garden, the man of his own garden. The lower lip was trembling, the words seemed to be issuing from back in the mouth somewhere, without reference to the lips moving or not moving. The old man's eyelids were red with exhaustion, the eyes themselves heavy with grief.

It was as if the heart were a turning wheel, and the wheel stopped. Everything stopped for some moments—minutes, they seemed—excepting only for the pulse thudding in the ears.

The news could only be news of *them*, of the two lovely ones. He must not, in this blade-edged instant of time, allow even their names to form within his skull.

"For Christ's sake! Not now!" He was screaming, he noted with horror. "Get up the slope there!" He had the voice under control again, as if it were one of these machines he had been dealing with. The *kebun* was an old man. He wouldn't be as spry as the others shinning up that greasy slope. "Get out of the way, *kebun*, or you'll be blown up!" It was not only the voice, it was the hands, too, he must get under control, the leaden lump of his body. He dived down into himself for the last reserves of his nervous strength.

Air came into the clogged veins again, the wheel of the heart turned. "Get back, everybody!" he shouted. There were still two or three men down there, mopping up the job. He raced across to the north abutment, thrust in the detonator, attached the wire, tamped it down. Then back to the south bank, the south abutment. He thrust in the second detonator, attached the second wire, tamped it down.

The Bren gun stuttered once again, once again, and then was silent. A curiously solemn and mournful silence. He raced back up the slope now. As he reached road-level a bullet went twanging by him. It seemed to bring a word with it as it went by from the barrel of the gun that had discharged it. "*Banzai!*" the word was, thin and far and shrill. "*Banzai! Banzai!*" now as shrill but not so far. He turned his head as he ran and saw the Japanese surging forward, from right and left on either side of the bridge, and round the crater he had blown up in the road.

"The battery?" he asked himself.

Here it was, neat in its brown leather case. Twist the wires, tighten the screw!

"Into the ditch, everybody!" he shouted, so hoarsely he could not hear his own voice. He got down himself, flat on his stomach. Then he depressed and twisted the battery-lever. A silence followed, but that was not a condition of either, but of the spirit, an era of waiting outside time and sound. For there was, of course, no era of waiting at all. Whatever happened, happened at once. There seemed no connection between the simple movements and their effects. First the whole sky filled like a cup with yellow flame, even down to the trough he lay in below road-level, where the dislodged air slapped his body like a wave. Then there was a sound as of a great cracking and tearing apart, as if it might be the very ribs of the earth. The noises then separated upon the ear, the noise of split concrete hitting hard surfaces sharply, soft surfaces dully. These diminished. The sound that followed was like the yellow

flame that had come first, the whole dome of sky filled with it. It was a sort of whispering and a suffling, which came out of the branches of the rubber-trees as they scraped against each other, and the leaves which scurried about the air like birds in trouble.

Danny rose to his feet, his nostrils stuffed with sour dust and his eyelids smarting. He stood waiting for a moment or two while the bluish smoke-clouds settled, peering towards the place where the bridge had been. There was no more bridge. There was only a gulf of air, and two edges of roadway like cracked biscuits, and the earth of the further bank scooped out as with the burrowing of monstrous snouts and claws.

"Good show!" breathed Danny. He tore the flex from the battery in his hand and raced across to the lorries. The men were already piled in helter-skelter. The drivers were at their seats, the engines kicking and plunging to be off.

"You go, Hussein!" Hussein was the driver of the lorry which had held the explosives. Hussein went roaring off. "Hello, soldier! You here, too? That's fine! Jump in!" And the other one, his own servant, where was he, the one who carried a charge of explosive more devastating than these he had been busy with? "*Kebun*, where are you?" The old man came out from under the car, where he had hidden himself like a dog from a hubbub he does not understand. "I'll drive, Ahmud! I want to drive!" Danny insisted. Ahmud swung himself round the cab and into the lorry. "Come, *kebun*!" He lifted the old man into the driving seat, and followed. "Move!" he bade him. The old man moved. The car got into gear. They were away.

There was a noise of rifle fire from the grove all round them, the engine of the car was hammering two feet away. But there was a noise behind and above and below these, a voice, as it were, of a bell tolling.

"Something has happened to Helen, to my little Edward! Something terrible has happened! I daren't ask him! What can it be that has sent him to hunt me out? He's afraid to speak! What dreadful thing can it be?"

"*Baik! Baik!*" the boys behind were chanting. "Good! Good! *Bukan main!* Not playing at it! Good!" They were wild with their delight in the job so well and so timely done.

"He won't speak now till I order him to," Danny told himself. "He's afraid! Ahd I am, too! Oh, be a man, Danny!" Then he spoke to the old man at his side.

"*Kebun!*" he said. "You have news for me! Tell it all to me! Holding nothing back!"

So the man of the garden spoke to him and told him what had happened; also what might have happened. Whether it had or had not no man knew.

On the day Dick Copley's small convoy of cars, that included

Helen and Edward in the old Austin, left Kuala Lumpur for the south, there was already a great clutter of traffic on the road, although the full evacuation actually began the day following, Saturday, December the tenth. There were lorries with every sort of military equipment, private cars with refugees from towns and estates all the way back north, rickshaws, hand-carts, bullock-carts, motor-bicycles weaving in and out, pedal bicycles almost snapping in two with the weight of the bundles they carried, even perambulators and wheelbarrows, loaded like mad, hugging the ditch as closely as they could. And high above the other noises, like a river-bank shrill with grasshoppers, squealed the wheelbarrows, left carefully unoiled so that the squeal should keep the devils away. This time the device did not work.

The town of Seremban is some forty miles south of Kuala Lumpur, and Dick Copley's convoy had by ten o'clock only reached a point some six miles north of Seremban. The convoy had set out from Imbi Road at seven, so it obviously had met pretty sticky weather. The place and the time had been pin-pointed, so to speak, by young Ali, Ali bin Ibrahim, who happened to live in a *hampong* called Gidong, some three miles to the right of the road up a jungle track. At that point the rubber estates give out, and there is a fair-sized area of still uncleared jungle which stretches away westward from the road.

The *kebun* had not gone far with his recital before his voice tailed off, and he stopped. The *tuan* was so silent, the face so wholly without expression, the old man did not know whether his master was attending or not.

"My nephew, Ali," he repeated softly. "The son of my brother, Ibrahim. Does the *tuan* remember of whom I speak?"

Danny nodded. Yes, he was listening.

"I remember," he said. "I remember him well."

The fact was this Ali had a girl who was the daughter of one of Danny's neighbour's house-boys, and whenever he came up to Kuala Lumpur to pay his respects to the young lady, an occupation he preferred to any other, he would come in with gifts of fruit from Ibrahim, his father, to Yussuf, his father's brother. He had made Edward's acquaintance at about the time the tricycle was acquired. Nobody had had any objection to letting Ali take Edward out pedalling up and down Ampang Road. It gave both the young people immense pleasure.

As the Copley convoy approached the junction of the Gidong track and the road, it chanced that young Ali emerged on to the roadway, for he had been sent to buy in some stores from Wung Loo's little shop, which lay some two hundred yards further south, on the opposite side of the road. He was not sure whether he would have to pay for the stores, or would be able to help himself, for the rumour had already gone through to the *kampong* that Wung Loo had decided to disappear before the Japs came on the scene. There

was even a chance that a bomb had come down on the place, for the Jap planes had been up and around all day, and had dropped a number of bombs.

Then he saw *tuan* Copley at the wheel of his car, with his wife beside him, and the back of the car stuffed with suitcases. Then, not many yards behind them, the Mortimers, and then the Applebys. He knew them all quite well by sight and by name, for there is little about their employers' affairs which Malayan servants do not discuss in affectionate detail with their relatives. Besides, he had seen them all often enough on *tuan* Mather's lawn knocking back the evening stengah. Then followed one more car, driven by a *tuan* whose name he did not remember. Then finally *tuan* Mather's car had appeared on the scene, the rearguard of the convoy, as it were, for behind them for quite a distance there were no more private cars, only vans and military lorries. Not only, Ali insisted, did he recognize the car itself, and the *mem* and young *tuan kechi*—how was it possible not to recognize that yellow hair?—but he had recognized the beautiful, the famous, tricycle piled up on top of the suitcases. The *mem* had her eyes fixed on the road ahead of her, she was a rather nervous driver. He could not say she had noticed him, at that moment at least, but young *tuan kechi* certainly had, for he pulled at his mother's arm, and looked back excitedly and waved. She could not stop, of course, with the road so jammed, while Edward said how d'you do to the gardener's nephew. But only a few seconds later something occurred which gave her no alternative. She had to draw up.

They were passing the little clearing in front of Wung Loo's grocery store when a woman, a white woman carrying a small suitcase, came out to the edge of the road, and held up her hand. It could be presumed that she, too, was a refugee from somewhere, perhaps Kuala Lumpur, perhaps further north, and as likely as not her car had broken down. How long she had waited in Wung Loo's clearing could not be said. It must have dawned on her pretty soon, if in fact her car had broken down, that there was not much point in waiting. No one was likely to have time to do anything for her.

So the woman came out and held up her hand, and Helen slowed down for her. There was an angry hooting from the lorry behind, for probably she had not given the signal very accurately, she had always been rather sketchy with her signals. The lorry swung round into the road and got in ahead of her. At that moment Ali heard the sound of aircraft approaching from the east—they were Japanese aircraft, of course—and he threw himself down in the ditch. But the aircraft did not drop anything, for the moment at least. They continued on their westward flight. When Ali stood up on his feet again he saw that *mem's* car had stopped, and the strange white woman was already ensconced in the left-hand seat of the car. The *tuan kechi* was being quite insistent about something back in the road, which could be nothing other than Ali himself. When he perceived that, Ali began to run forward. The least he could do was

to bid godspeed to his young friend before he disappeared, perhaps for ever. But obviously the *mem* considered this no time for courtesies. The moment the strange white woman banged to the door of the car, the *mem* got into gear and drove off again.

Well, that is a sad thing, young Ali thought. I shall not see the *tuan kechi* again and draw the eyes of all the maidens in Ampang Road as I go up and down holding the handle-bar of the beautiful tricycle, with red-painted mudguards, and that warning bell which makes so loud and sweet a noise. So he walked forward for another seventy yards or so until he came to Wung Loo's clearing. He saw at once, with a slight pang of disappointment, that no bomb had fallen on Wung Loo's shop, and that if he wanted to acquire anything he would certainly have to pay for it, for there was Wung Loo large as life, his legs encased in his large black trousers, his bunch of silver prods and hooks dangling from his belt. It is true, he was clearly getting things together in preparation for his departure; the ornamented money-pouch at his waist seemed stuffed with money and papers. But he was there still, and he was well known to be a good businessman. Yet how, on the other hand, was he to get his stock away, and where was he to take it to? It occurred to Ali that there might be some prospect of making a deal with Wung Loo. Old Ibrahim had an old Ford back in the *hampong*. It was held together by bits of string, but it went. If he could induce Ibrahim to bring the Ford down to within some yards of the main road, why shouldn't they carry away a decent load of tinned stuff and hide it under a heap of banana-leaves among the piles in Ibrahim's shack?

"*Tabek*, Wung Loo! Greetings!" exclaimed Ali through the doorway.

"What do you want?" said the old gentleman sourly. "Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"It was my idea, Wung Loo——"

But he was not destined to expound his idea. One moment the aircraft were not in the sky. The next moment they were, very close indeed, it seemed, immediately overhead. The young man and old man threw themselves down flat, there was the loud explosion of a bomb, and then another, but they were not harmed. There was again an explosion, this time a little further away southward, then another. The Malay and the Chinese rose to their feet again.

"It is the traffic on the road they're bombing," declared Wung Loo rather primly. He dusted his jacket carefully. They might steal his stock from him when they came, but, at least, his jacket would be clean.

"Yes, it's the traffic on the road they're after," repeated Ali. And then his heart stirred uneasily within him. The traffic on the road. He hoped no harm had come to the *tuan kechi* and his mother. Perhaps yes, perhaps no. There were many, many vehicles, and the road was a narrow thing between the mining-land and the broad jungle. None the less, what harm could it do to go and see?

He turned from Wung Loo's store and regained the grassy strip by the roadside ; then he turned left, in the direction the bombs had fallen. There was a certain amount of trouble less than a hundred yards away. The bomb had actually come down into the jungle, but the concussion, or the driver's nerves, had screwed a big lorry round at right angles to the road and there was already a lot of traffic piled up all round him, with crashed radiators and interlocked bumpers.

"Hi, give a hand here, boy !" someone cried, and there was no help for it. He had to give a hand. That held him up considerably more than half an hour, and he wouldn't have got away then if he had not ducked between some tall *tuan's* thighs and made off.

"Hi !" they cried out after him. But he was away, loping along steadily and swiftly, like some jungle animal.

Tuan Mather's car was not more than a mile away down the road from Wung Loo's clearing. It was still behind a lorry, as it had been when it passed from Ali's sight some hour or so earlier. But neither vehicle would ever move again. The lorry was still burning. It had obviously had a direct hit, and had probably been carrying petrol judging from the state it was in. The Austin lay on its side, its roof torn off, a dreadful ruin. If Ali had had any doubt that this was *tuan* Mather's car, the tricycle that stood oddly on its saddle, charred and twisted, removed it. The Austin, too, had caught alight, but it was not burning now. Someone had apparently used a chemical fire-extinguisher on it, but the fire had burned long enough to reduce the luggage in the back seat to cinders. But not the luggage only. There was one charred and unrecognizable body straddled across the exposed and blackened springs of the forward seat. One body, one only, the body of a woman. Some attempt had been made to move the body, but the result had been so hideous, that, obviously, the attempt had been suspended for the time being. There was for the present nothing more to do. The stream of traffic continued as best it could on the southward road, skirting the still-burning lorry and the glowing Ausin. Later traffic would have to do something about pushing them off the roadway when the wrecks were easier to handle.

The old man paused. If the *tuan's* hands had not been so awake on the wheel, he would have believed the *tuan* was in a sort of daze, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, he was so deathly still throughout the whole telling of this tale. Only the lips quivered a little, like the twitching a small animal, dying.

Then suddenly the *tuan* spoke, almost like a woman's the voice was, it was so sharp and thin.

"*Kebun*, which of those women was it ? Which ? Where was my boy ?"

"It could not be said, *tuan*, which of the two women it was. The strange white woman was of the average size of your country-

woman, as the *mem* herself is. The clothing was all burned like straw in a furnace."

"But my boy, *kebun*, my boy?"

"There was no trace of him and of the second woman, whichever she was. I am gull of grief, *tuan*, I can hardly speak."

"Tell me. What can have happened? Were there no people round about? Did Ali make inquiries? Where is Ali now?" He pressed his foot so violently on the accelerator that he missed smashing full-tilt into the car ahead of him by a fraction of an inch.

"The traffic was moving, moving, *tuan*. There was no room there on the roadway, and there was no time. Earlier, the boy thinks, someone must have stopped. They seemed to have tried to put out the burning. They may have written things down on papers. Perhaps they carried away the young *tuan* and the one woman that . . . that did not die. Ali cannot say. He went by small tracks into the jungle hoping to meet someone round about who could tell something. Perhaps he might even come across the young *tuan* himself with that other one, frightened and hurt and not knowing where they went. But there was no one there. The dwellers off the road in those parts had gone deep into the jungle, fearing the flying things, that came still again while young Ali was wandering around and shouting, the tears running from his eyes as it were in rivers. So at length Ali knew there was only one thing to do. He must come up to Kuala Lumpur to the *tuan's* house and impart to him these black tidings. He came, and you were gone, *tuan*. So he went seeking for you to the north and east, and I to the north and west, leaving the others in the house, where I believe they did not stay long, and perhaps they are not there any longer, *tuan*, I cannot say. So in opposite directions we were seeking, my brother's son and I, and have been seeking all these long hours since, day and night. And in the morning of this day rumour came to me, as rumour will, that the *tuan* might be found at the Serau Bridge below Kuala Kubu, working on it to make it come apart.

"So I have found you, *tuan*. And I would say that rather I had been dead than chosen to bring this news. But Allah willed it, and who shall debate with Allah? Great is He!"

Once more a long time Danny was silent. A mile went by, another. Even so soon his mouth seemed to have fallen in, as if his jaws were an old man's, and toothless. His eyes were dead black, like the pools that form among heaps of slag. He said nothing, nothing, nothing.

Then at last he was conscious that another voice was speaking, this time with English words. It seemed to be a long way off, but that could not be, for it moved with the moving lorry, and was therefore close at hand.

"I do 'ope it's not bad news, guv'nor, beggin' your pardon. As I was sayin', if you'd like me to take the wheel over——"

"Wheel over?" asked Danny. You might have thought he had been drinking.

"I used to drive a Scammell, guv'nor, back 'ome in Deptford."

"That's all right," said Danny. "I'd rather drive, if you don't mind."

"I quite understand, sir," the voice said sympathetically. "I do 'ope it's not bad news," it said once again.

"That's all right," said Danny.

The voice paused. Then it resumed again. Perhaps the young man felt it would be a good idea to try and take the guv'nor's mind off the news the dago had just handed out to him, whatever it was. Pretty lousy news, it looked like, judging from the way the poor bloke was taking it. Good bloke 'e was, the job 'e'd made of that blinkin' bridge! Coo, that was a good job of work, that was!

"So I said to 'er, I said: 'Come on now, Ida! 'Ave a 'eart!' Do you know what she said to me? They're all the same, you know, guv'nor. Do you know what she said?" He paused and looked at Danny out of the corner of his eye. He found no mark of curiosity in Danny's demeanour, but he went on bravely, none the less.

The thing Ida had said made no impact on Danny's mind, whatever it might have been. He was constrained within the desolate circle of his own thought.

"It's night," he told himself. "How long has it been dark? But it's not dark down there. The sky's streaked with fires. It looks as if all Kuala Lumpur's burning." He was aware of a scrubby hummock thickening the darkness on his left hand. "That must be Batu Caves," he said. "We're only about six miles from home." The smell of burning rubber was sour in his nostrils. There was a bright flash, then a dull explosion, now from the south-west, now the south-east. "They're making a good job of it," he said. "I suppose we'll still be able to cross the railway at Sentul." Time passed; it might have been minutes, it might have been hours. It was all right. The bridge was still intact at Sentul, but the constructional workshops were blazing fiercely.

It was two miles from that point to the centre of Kuala Lumpur. But it wasn't Kuala Lumpur any more. The place had always been a little pompous, a little big for its boots, as an Ealing or Wimbledon might be if it suddenly found itself given the job of administering the Home Counties, and the Mayor and the Borough Council had once been on a conducted tour to Granada. It all looked like a suburban ballroom the morning after the night before, and the servants had all suddenly gone mad and started smashing up the place. There had been a certain amount of bombing, too, of course, and a good deal of planned demolition. But it wasn't that that drew you up with a jerk, the gutted buildings, the bomb-craters, the smouldering warehouses and workshops. Nor the corpses lying around like baled goods the lorries had not carted off. After all, one had been

looking at photographs of events in Guernica, Shanghai, Rotterdam, Warsaw, London, for donkey's years. It was those nice Moorish buildings, even when they were not damaged, somehow already as dead and done for as Aztec temples and Druid stone circles. It was the smart stores with smashed windows and emptied store-cases, starkly revealed in the fitful ebb and flow of fires. And the silence, the loneliness, made all the keener by the sudden crack of blazing wood breaking in upon itself, and the lift and fall of furtive feet in the gutters. Here and there were a few little Tamils lying about, drunk and snoring, with as much toddy in their bellies at last as they could ever have dreamed of. Apart from these no one else, no one. It was odd how aware you were of the big Sikh policemen, exactly because they were not there any more, moving people along, directing people at street corners. Just as you might be more aware of Nelson's Column, just because it wasn't there any more in Trafalgar Square. The Sikhs weren't there. Law and order and decency weren't there any more. There were only empty cartons and smashed bottles of hair-oil and vomit and shavings and glass-splinters and silence. It was pretty awful.

The first job was to call at the offices in Brickfields Road. It was hard not to call in home first, or slide into the Spotted Dog in case some belated and obstinate planter were still sitting in a wicker chair on a verandah, a stengah before him, his life behind him, and some news of Helen had somehow got to him from somewhere. The planters were always ahead of everybody with the hottest news and the last dirty story, though they lived miles up-country. But he kept on. He got to the offices at length. They looked all right. They were standing, at least. The other lorry was drawn up there, too, as he expected, but there was nobody in it. The boys had dispersed like mist. He braked and got down on to the pavement. The lad from the East Surreys got down after him.

"Bit of an 'ow-d'you-do!'" the young man said.

"Yes," Danny agreed. "It looks a bit of a mess."

"Excuse me askin'! But can I give you a 'and?"

"Thanks. I'll carry on from here. But there's one thing you can do. Will you take that other lorry down to Singapore? Hand it over to the people in charge, will you? Ask for P.W.D. head-quarters. Tell them I'll be along with my report as soon as I can get there."

"Certainly, sir." The lad got down and strode around a moment a little awkwardly. "I 'ope everything's goin' to be all right."

"Thank you. I'm sorry about your two mates." Danny held out his hand. "Good luck to you."

"Yes, sir. It's all in the luck of the game. Good luck to you, too, sir." He went over to the other lorry. "Good-bye, sir," he called out, and drove off.

Danny turned to the *kebun*.

"If you wish to go now," he said, "you may go. Or you might

wait until I come out of this place, where I seek news. But your wife will be much concerned."

"I will wait, *tuan*," said the old man, "lest someone drive away the lorry."

"Very well."

Danny turned and went up to the main door. It was open. The lock had been forced.

"Of course nobody'll be here," he told himself. "But perhaps there's a message waiting for me on His Nibs's desk . . . if I can find it. Everything will be in a godawful mess."

He was right about nobody being there. Obviously the whole shoot had been ordered out at least a day or two ago. But things were not in an awful mess. Nothing had been touched. There was nothing much to touch—roll-top desks, filing cabinets, that sort of thing. There was just one typewriter in a bit of a state. Somebody had been rather annoyed—possibly the gentleman who had forced the lock—and smashed a hammer or something down on to the keys of a typewriter. There was no note waiting for Danny on His Nibs's desk. It was curiously dark and quiet inside there. Outside the flames flickered and the looters howled.

Time was getting very short. The enemy would be in Kuala Lumpur, he thought, within a few hours at most. But it was quite impossible for him to leave the place without making quite certain there was no news for him at his house. Perhaps one of the boys had stayed behind. Perhaps the young Ali had now turned up there, having received news from some source.

The *kebun* was still in the lorry, huddled small and silent in the driving-seat.

"While I can still think of it," Danny said to himself. He swung himself into the car, then reached for his wallet.

"I go back to the house," he said. "You will come?"

"I will come."

"Here is money for you. The other boys will be gone now. You have missed your share of rice and linen by coming to seek me out."

"It was not for money I went forth, *tuan*."

"It is not right you should lose." He pressed the notes into his hand.

"Allah will look after your dear ones for you, *tuan*," the old man mumbled. "The *tuan* will learn one day they are well." He stuffed the notes away under his *baju*.

The car was already going back the way it had come, towards the house in Ampang Road. The streets were quite deserted now, excepting for a few faceless creatures dragging off their dead. In Ampang Road itself there were one or two fitful scavengers stealing from house to house, as if there were still some bits left for the picking. The houses seemed dark and empty excepting for one place about half-way up on the left-hand side, which was empty, but not

dark. It had been burning for some time, it seemed, and there was nothing much of it left to burn now. It might have been an incendiary bomb, or some spiteful servant might have set it ablaze—you could not tell.

"I think that's the Hawkes' place, isn't it?" Danny thought. "Well, that's a clean break, anyhow."

He reached the driveway of his own home and got out of the lorry, then, advancing to the garden gate, he laid his hand upon it, thinking for some odd reason it might be hanging loose on its hinges. But it was quite intact. He swung it open, and advanced a few yards, then stopped and waited. He did not quite know what it was he waited for. Did he expect to hear Helen call out from behind the windows of the long verandah: "Hello, is that you, Danny? I've been expecting you for ages, my dear!" Or perhaps Edward might have a thing or two to say. Oh, no, that was unlikely. It was long past Edward's bedtime.

What about Susie? Surely Susie ought to be doing her familiar gargle now? But there was no Susie any more. Her kennel at the side of the house was empty. He stood and waited and listened, but heard only the sound of his own heart beating.

"Anybody there?" he called out at length. "Anybody there?"

There was no answer, excepting if it was an answer that a pigeon roosting in a tree-top seemed to be disturbed by his voice, and flapped his wings as he moved over. And the cicadas went click-clack in the grass, and the frogs boomed from under the hibiscus by the edge of the small pool. There was no other answer.

Then he went round to the back of the house and looked over towards the house-boys' quarters.

"Anybody there?" he called. There was nobody there. He turned and came round to the front of the house again. He stood and looked at it for some moments. There were only a few yards of lawn between himself and the wooden stairway that led up to the verandah. Yet already it seemed that those few yards were as wide as a sea, and the house and the life glimpsed on that far shore were his no more, gone for ever and for ever.

He turned at length on his heel, and went out into the roadway, to the dark hulk of the lorry. He could not see the *kebun* by the steering-wheel, or anywhere round about.

"*Kebun*, are you there?" he called out.

There was no reply. He, too, had gone. He climbed into the lorry and made for the road to Seremban and the south.

CHAPTER FIVE

HE had been silent for several minutes, leaning forward in the old rocking-chair in the high yellow-washed kitchen of The Hazels. The rocking-chair had not been rocking. The weight and length of his legs had kept it motionless. The old woman to whom he had been telling his tale uttered no word, made no sign. The poor lamb, sometimes his voice is so low you can't hear a word he says, but let him talk his heart out! It's only like yesterday he'd be climbing up and down on to that same chair, playing some game about he was climbing up to the top of some big foreign mountains, India or somewhere, and he'd have a rope round his middle, and a kitchen-broom in his hand, whatever did he call that broom . . . hush now, he's talking again.

"I think the half-hour before and after I got to Wung Loo's place was as tough as any I've been through. I had a pretty good idea where the store was, but it was dark, and there was a great deal moving on the road . . . and a great deal that was not moving. You can imagine what it was like wondering whether that dark lump of wreckage, or the next one, or that one back in the ditch, was our old Austin; wondering whether anything was still there . . . the old tricycle, or anything at all. But it was impossible to get out and park the lorry, and start nosing around. Even if I'd spotted the Austin, what good could it have done? I mean, I couldn't just ditch everything and go off into the jungle to see what I could find out. It had to wait. I'd come back. Somehow or other I'd come back if all the Japs in hell swarmed over the country." His face was screwed up with pain. His nails were dug so deep into his palm you felt it must be bleeding. "So the procession of cars kept on moving, moving, all the time, horns hooting, and lights dimmed. And then there came a moment when I knew the Austin must be definitely behind us. And soon after that we were on the outskirts of Seremban.

"So it went on. It was a queer night. I didn't actually get into Singapore before ten o'clock next morning, because something went wrong with the works. The first thing I did was to go along to Head Office. I'd been on a job, after all. But before I opened my mouth, His Nibs put out his hand to me. I could see at once he'd heard about . . . this other business. It was pretty decent of him, the way he handled it.

" 'Tough luck, old chap!' he said.

" 'Thank you, sir,' I said. 'Any news?'

" 'I'm awfully sorry, old chap. I've been making inquiries. No luck, so far.' He shook his head. 'But I say, we mustn't give up hope, really, Mather, that would be all wrong. You know what a how-d'you-do everything's in.

"'If you don't mind, sir . . . who told you about it? Was it the young fellow who'd . . . who'd been down there . . . when the bombs dropped?'

"'No. He went up-country straight away to try and locate you. It was one of your Chinese boys.'

"'I see. Nobody knows who that woman was, I suppose? Not that that makes any difference.'

"'No. Several people in the convoy caught sight of her. She'd been sitting on a tree-stump, and came down towards the road as they went by. Nobody recognized her. She may have come from Ipoh or Penang, or anywhere.'

"'What's your idea, sir? What do you think I might do?'

"'Well, for the present all we can do is to go on making inquiries up and down the place. I think you ought to try and ease off a bit sometime to-day, if you possibly can. I mean, we're all going to be hard at it, and I don't want you knocked up. You look pretty bloody.'

"'Yes, sir. After I give you the dope, I'll go along to Raffles. Perhaps there's a message or something. Perhaps they've got through themselves by now. She'd naturally gravitate to Raffles if it didn't occur to her to come here. You never know.'

"'You never know,' said His Nibs. Then he asked me to come round to his side of the desk, where he had a map stretched out before him, and we had a bit of a session for half an hour or so.

"As soon as I was through with him I went round to Raffles. That's the big hotel down there. Or it was. The people in Colombo told me a good deal of it was done in before it was all over. The place still looked pretty normal, I must say, for an hotel in a place which was being pretty heavily bombed all the time. I saw a few things on the way that would have made me heave a bit normally. I came along just after a bomb hit the fish-market just below. It was pretty ghastly. I'd already got that odd feeling inside here . . . you know, all dried up and spent, like the clinker you take out of a boiler.

"So I got to Raffles, and went up to the clerk at the desk. He was an Indian. I knew the fellow, for whenever Helen and I came down to Singapore we'd always stay at Raffles. The fellow recognized me, too.

"'How do you do, Mr. Mather?' he said. He was a Bengali or something. 'I hope you are well.' You might have thought it was Bank Holiday at the Regent's Palace Hotel.

"'I don't suppose my wife and child have got here by any chance?" I asked.

"'Oh, no, Mr. Mather. Oh, no.' He knew that without looking into his books. If Helen and Edward appeared from anywhere, you didn't forget about them.

"'Well, there isn't a message from her, is there? Or from somebody else about them, maybe?'

"He turned round and examined the pigeon-holes.

" 'No, Mr. Mather, I regret. There is nothing for you.' Then suddenly he stopped and tapped his forehead with his pencil. 'It is how absurd of me. There is certainly something for you. It is an attaché-case, which has your name on the label. One moment, please, Mr Mather. He dived round the nest of pigeon-holes to a small space back there where they kept odd parcels and pieces of luggage. Then after a few moments he came out again. He had my attaché-case in his hand . . . this." Danny pointed the thing out where it lay a few inches from his feet beside the chair. He had lifted it down from the dresser. "He handed it over to me.

" 'This is yours, sir?' he asked.

"It was, of course. It had this same label on, you see. There was a lot more of it then. It's been through the mill since.

" 'Who left it, man?' I asked. 'Are you sure it wasn't Mrs. Mather . . . or perhaps . . . some other lady, who had my small boy with her?'

" 'I am sure, sir, it was not Mrs. Mather. I am sure your small boy was not here with some other lady. He is a comely small boy. I would not fail to perceive him.'

"Who in God's name left it, then? Did nobody say anything?'

" 'I very much regret, sir. I was alone here. There was some rushing. I had everything to do myself. There were also some bombs starting to fall along the front there. And when it was less excitement, I found the case on the counter. There were still some people here, and some others had gone, it maybe to find shelter. I asked the ladies and gentlemen here had anyone left it. But no one was knowing anything about it. I am sorry, sir. This is how the circumstance was.'

"That is how it was. I opened the bag. It was open, I hadn't locked it. The things were there, just as I had flung them in at the last moment. More or less as they are now, excepting that they got a bit damp now and again. But there was no more. I hoped there might be, somehow."

"Yes, Master Danny," breathed the old woman. "Of course."

"The case must have been thrown clear of the car somehow. You know the odd things that happen. I suppose somebody saw the bag lying there, and picked it up, and saw it had an address. So he just delivered it."

Martha nodded.

"I suppose," he repeated. It was like an echo from far off of his own voice. Then he fell into prolonged silence. He stared straight before him, not even his eyelids seemed to quiver. Then he let the weight of his body slip backwards, lifting it from his legs and feet. The rocking-chair started rocking. The motion seemed, after a time, to dull his pain a little. He looked curiously like an old man or a small boy, decades away from his real age, as he swung forward

and backward, forward and backward, describing an arc between youth and age.

She found, almost with surprise, he was talking again, for she had been thinking perhaps it would be a good thing if she left him there, swinging to and fro, and it seemed to be doing the poor lad a little good somehow. She would steal across to the sink and get through with the washing-up ; she could do it very quietly, really she could, if she put her mind to it. You had to be able to do things quietly, there at The Hazels, if you were asked to, with Miss Letford's swinging scapula suddenly giving her a turn, and Miss Potts having one of her migraines. And, gracious goodness, there was half the stuff still piled up on the draining-board, and whatever would Miss Letford say coming in from the Vicarage, for she understood the ladies were paying a call at the Vicarage after they had deposited their flowers at the grave. And in war-time you would think that there's better things you might be doing with money, War Savings or what not, than buying grand flowers with it to lay on the graves of old people who died fifty years ago, when there's young folk the wide world over. . . .

Yes, it was Master Danny taking up again the tale of what had happened. The unwashed dishes melted into less than soap-bubbles.

"Of course everything in our Department was at sixes and sevens. You can understand there wasn't any question of regular office-hours. Naturally, we put in an appearance. I must say His Nibs was a good old stick. I heard later on a bomb had got him. An awful shame, he really was one of the best. Besides, if she turned up in Singapore, she was as likely to make straight for the office as anywhere. But I spent most of the time running round the place—we had a big circle of friends in Singapore—asking everyone I knew, and lots of people I didn't know, I suppose. For about a week I became quite a lounge-lizard, at tea-dances and cocktail bars, and so on." He grimaced. "It was all very odd, with the Japs coming up closer and closer the whole time, and the bombs dropping up and down. There was one beauty of a raid. Ah, well, it's silly talking about raids to people who were back home. Yes, of course there were people round about the place knocking back the stengahs, or dancing with their women, if they were around. Of course there were !" He raised his voice, as if Martha had reproved him and all Singapore for its levity during those last weeks of its agony. "Most of the time they were officers up in town for twenty-four hours' leave. Or civilians who'd been at their jobs for thirty or forty hours straight, and wanted to forget a bit. But it was odd, I grant you that. There were a few sights as you mooched round that made the old stomach heave a bit, particularly in the Chinese quarters. I went round to the hospitals, too, both in Singapore and Johore." He hesitated. "You know, in case they'd had concussion or some-

thing, and they'd lost their memory. Or perhaps one of them had turned up. It was pretty bloody, poking about in those wards.

"Well, I wasn't getting anywhere. They hadn't got to Singapore. Yes, I admit Singapore's a pretty big place, and it was in rather a muddle already. But if they'd both turned up together, I couldn't possibly have failed to hear about them. Or even one of them. So where were they? That's what I had to reckon out. They'd got clear of the car, of course they had. I knew that the woman who had got clear of the car was Helen; it *must* have been Helen." He paused. "Mustn't it?" he asked. He answered the question himself. "It *was* Helen! She couldn't have been the one . . . left behind. No, Martha, no! God wouldn't play such a lousy trick!" He turned and stared into the eyes of the old woman, as if he might find assurance there. Her lips quivered, but she said no word. He went on. "So where were they? They were back in the country the Japanese had overrun. The Japs were beyond Gemas by this time, they were seeping into Johore State. They were back there somewhere, in that stretch of jungle north of Seremban. Don't you see what had happened, Martha? They'd managed to get clear of the car, and they ran off into the jungle by the side of the road there. I mean, you can imagine the state poor old Helen was in. She must have thought if she could only get away from that road she'd be getting the boy away from the bombs, too. Somehow I feel she can't have known what she was doing. If she had, she'd have worked her way back to the road and somebody would have picked them up. So perhaps she was hurt. That's what I think, the poor darling, she was hurt, and some native from one of the *kampongs* back there came across them, and got them back to his own place where they could be looked after. You don't know how decent the people were. All this poppycock about the Malays not lifting a finger to help us! It makes me sick! *I* know! Well, I was saying, they were looking after her in some *kampong*, and before many days had passed they had to lie pretty doggo, too, because the Japs had taken over.

"That's how I work it out, Martha, see? And I'm still convinced, somehow, that's what happened. Well, there I was mucking around Singapore, and there they were somewhere back in the jungle. What was there I could do about it? I had a job, and everyone was needed pretty badly. But I had that other job, too. I had to find out what had happened to Helen and Edward.

"And that's where His Nibs came in. He called me one morning —I think I'd been in Singapore seven or eight days—gosh, he was decent. He told me there'd been an inquiry from the high-ups asking if there were any people in our outfit who might volunteer to drift off up-country through the enemy lines, and do a bit of damage up and down the place. We'd had to move out pretty fast, but apparently we'd hidden a few useful little dumps of explosives here and there, and a radio set or two, if a few of us got together and

wanted to maintain contact. It needed people who knew the country and the lingo, of course. There was tin dredges and rubber plants to attend to, possibly a few had been neglected, And railway lines to blow up, and telephone wires to cut. In war-time every little helps. His Nibs had an idea that perhaps I'd like to take on the area north of Seremban. What did I think about it?

"What did I think about it? I nearly jumped out of my skin. He warned me it was pretty dangerous work. I mightn't get back and all that. I said if I couldn't find any trace of them up there, what had I to come back for, anyway?

"Then he looked at me straight through the eyes, in a way he had.

" 'What have you to come back for?' he asked. 'Because it's your job to come back. Because I want you back. We're short of staff, and whatever happens, our department will have a hell of a lot of work on its hands.'

" 'Yes, of course,' I said. I felt pretty mean. 'I'll get back if I can.'

" 'If you can. That's all I expect.' He stopped, then went on again. 'Now I quite understand how bloody it is for you beating around Singapore. It works out well for both of us. We want you up-country. We want you to establish certain contacts, and it might as well be that particular part of the country as any other. And you want to feel you're actually doing something that's going to help you get to the bottom of your own business, instead of merely hanging around, asking questions. But I want you to be logical about it. A clear head never got in the way of anything. In point of actual fact, by moving out of Singapore you may just miss her. She and the boy may arrive—if they're still all right—the very day you move out. I think there's quite a lot in the idea that after they got patched up—once again assuming that's how it was—they may have been smuggled from *kampong* to *kampong* till they reached the coast, somewhere near Port Dickson, let us say. Then, when the way was clear, they might have been taken off in a sampan. They might be nosing their way down the coast this very moment. But for God's sake!' He stopped.

" 'Yes? Please carry on!'

" 'It's not easy, but I think I've got to say one thing, if you'll let me.'

" 'Please!'

" 'The youngster's all right, I hope. We can allow ourselves to believe that.'

" 'Of course,' I said. 'Of course he's all right!'

" 'But you've got to accept the idea that if you find him, it may be the other woman——' He didn't go on. He'd got it said, and he knew it was just about as much as I could stand. He went back to the other thing, the chance I ran of missing them by going out after them. 'It's like bombing,' he said, 'you can never say. If you stay, it might get you. If you go out to escape it, you might be

heading straight for it.' I don't know what made him talk like that. He stayed, and got it. 'They might get back to Singapore while you're trying to trace them up-country. If they did, they might be bundled off at a moment's notice—to Cape Town, to Sydney, wherever a ship might be making for.'

" 'I'll have to risk all that,' I said. 'What would you like me to do?'

" 'I'd like you to come back in about three or four weeks, if you can make it. That'll give us both a chance. You could do a fair bit of damage in that time, and establish contact with the other people you'll meet out here. Some have volunteered to stay behind. Others are going out now, as you are. Three or four weeks,' he repeated slowly. 'I suppose there'll be a Singapore to come back to.'

" 'Oh, good Lord!' I said, rather shocked. But he had got things taped, a little more accurately than most of the folk higher up than he was. He could only have been out by a day or two. He looked up and smiled, then we got down to the map, and he gave me the dope. I memorized it all. It wouldn't have been very clever to put it down on paper. When he was satisfied I'd got it, we said good-bye. That was the last I saw of him."

He fell into a silence so prolonged that Martha began to wonder whether he had got to the end of his tale, or at least as much of it as he wished to tell her. His eyes were closed. His voice was tired now, his cheeks looked at least as sallow as before. But she hoped, she was sure, he must have eased a little the constriction at his heart by the mere act of speech, even though his tale led, alas, to no happy ending. She remembered with a start that she ought to have had the big silver tea-tray out by now, with the silver kettle and teapot and the very special Rockingham tea-set for the special high tea with which it had been arranged that the ladies should conclude their day of anniversary mourning. All very special, very ceremonial. She had been told that those grand things had been used on the day of the actual funeral fifty years ago, and she wasn't at all sure that they had been used since then, not all of them anyhow, that great tray, you would say it was grand enough for Queen Victoria herself, though scouring it and polishing it it took years off your life, honestly it did. And not only wasn't the tea-tray set out over in the drawing-room, but here in the kitchen the luncheon-things were not finished with yet. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! She wondered if she might get up from the sofa and steal over to the sink ever so quietly, and carry on while he sat back there, poor lamb, thinking, thinking, perhaps even he might doze off. But he was talking again. She did not move.

"Shadows, rumours, echoes. Oh, you don't know how much I had of all that. For instance, that very morning, an hour or two after I left His Nibs, I had a few people to see before I went off, and

one of them was a fellow called Neave, in the Forestry Department. It'll give you some idea. As I came into his office, he'd just put the telephone receiver down.

"'Well, I'll be damned!' he said. 'I was just talking about you!'

"'What?' I shouted. 'Have you heard anything?'

"'I have,' he said. 'But for God's sake, go easy!'

"'All right, all right! What have you heard?'

"'It's a fellow called Gardiner, in the Forestry Department. He was at Ipoh. I don't think you know him? I thought not. Well, he's doing liaison work with the Aussies, and he came up yesterday to see his wife, and, incidentally, to see her off. She'd only just got here, but she was told to report at once as there was a chance of a passage. They'd lost everything, of course, and while she was rushing around like mad to get a few things to put in a suitcase, he and I met to have a quick one. I told him about you, and about Helen and Edward, and how worried you were.'

"'You don't say he's seen them, do you? Where is he, Neave, where is he?'

"'Now come on, old chap,' he said, 'hold your horses. I told him about you, and that was that. But when he joined his wife again, somehow or other he brought it up; I mean, how a friend of mine was milling round the place looking for his wife and his small son, a kid about seven, with a head of bright yellow hair.'

"'Well, that's odd,'' she said. 'There was a woman and a small boy in the queue just behind me. I noticed that head of hair, pure gold it was. Yes, he was about seven. You might mention it to Mr. Neave, will you? and he'll get into touch with the husband. I mean, if it *is* the husband. I don't suppose she's the only young woman in Malaya with a gold-haired kid of seven.'

"I got hold of his arms and nearly broke them off.

"'Where is he?' I shouted. 'Where can I find him? Where's his wife?'

"'I'm terribly sorry, Mather, old boy. Listen, for crying out loud. The woman went off in a cargo-boat last night. No, the name of it wasn't mentioned. As for Gardiner, he was just calling up to say good-bye. He was going back to the front. I haven't the ghost of an idea where the unit is that he's working with.'

"'Well, what can I *do*, Neave? God Almighty, there must be something I can do!'

"Neave thought for a moment, and looked pretty blank. Then his face changed.

"'Of course!' he shouted. 'What idiots we both are! All you need do is go off at once to the Shipping Company's Offices in Collier Quay.' He said they'd all been queued up in Collier Quay, and they were bound to have a list——'

"I didn't wait till he finished. I turned and ran out of the place as if it was on fire. I got to Collier Quay." He shook his head and

screwed up his eyes like a small boy trying not to cry. "I got to Collier Quay," he repeated.

"And then, Master Danny?" the old woman breathed fearfully.

"Did I say the dice were loaded against me from the beginning, or didn't I?" he cried out bitterly. "A bomb had completely wiped out the Shipping Offices only an hour or so earlier. There wasn't a trace of them. The clerks were gone, the books were gone. There was no clue to lead me anywhere. I could have sat down in that heap of smoking rubble and cried my eyes out. And then I got myself in hand. I started thinking. It couldn't possibly have been Helen and Edward, I told myself, because they'd certainly have inquired for me at Head Office or Raffles or somewhere. And somebody else would have seen them. It *wasn't* Helen and Edward! It just might have been, but it wasn't!" He banged his fist upon his thigh. "That's what's been so bloody about the whole thing, never being absolutely certain of anything. Oh, my God, I wish I was dead!"

She desperately wanted to get him out of this mood. She was only a kitchen-maid. That's what she had been all her life, and would be till the end of it, which wasn't so far off. He, on the other hand, was a gentleman, with his place on that big framed pedigree Miss Letford had. He was also a gentleman in a high position, at least he had been, and would be again. Yet what did all that matter? She was a woman, an old woman. He was a child, almost. It was funny how much he had looked like his own self of twenty years ago, rocking away on that chair. There was something terribly childlike in the way he had said those words: "Oh, my God, I wish I was dead!" Like a child who has been cruelly deprived of the toys he has loved most in all the world.

She must soothe him, as she knew she had been doing, by letting him talk and talk, till he began to feel that there was still somewhere a glimmer of hope. The devil could take the silver tray, and the best tea-set, and the boiled eggs, and the cress sandwiches, and the different kinds of jam, and the honey.

"And what did you next go on to do, Master Danny?" she asked in an almost breezy tone. "Did you off where all those horrible yellow men were? Did you really, Master Danny?"

But he did not answer her question, as he would have done, no doubt. For at that moment a loud hammering was heard on the further side of the kitchen door. At the same time someone started shaking the door-handle so furiously you felt it must come off. Then the door was flung open, to reveal an old woman really quite alarmingly old, even in that houseful of old women, and even more alarmingly angry. She wore a mauve woollen night-cap, a knitted woollen bed-jacket and a long viyella nightgown, and now that the door was open she began belabouring the inner side of the panels with her stick, an ebony stick, with a handle of green horn. She had few teeth in her head, and as she moved her jaws in the effort, as

seemed, to separate and bring forth the words blocked at the back of her throat, the froth seethed at the corners.

"My God in Heaven!" cried Martha, jumping to her feet. "Miss Stanmore! Oh, Miss Stanmore," she begged, "asking your pardon a thousand times! At once, Miss Stanmore! I'll——"

So this was *dear* Miss Stanmore, the old lady made up out of sugar and spice and everything nice. Well, well. Danny blinked. She looked a bit fed up on the whole.

Miss Stanmore was banging on the floor now, with that ebony stick. It looked like a stick to keep away from; it could deal out a nasty crack.

"It's monstrous!" proclaimed Miss Stanmore, the words unloosed from each other at last. "Monstrous! Here have I been waiting for one whole hour for my afternoon milk! I won't stay in this house a single day longer! Not one day! You can tell Miss Letford! Never in all my life have I known such treatment!"

Her whole body was shaking with fury. She looked as if she would just come apart, so racked with bad temper she was.

"I'll get it you at once!" quivered Martha, running over to the tray-rack for a tray. "I'll heat it up this very instant!" She had ceased in these few seconds to be the wise Martha, the spiritually pliant and capable Martha. She was Martha the drudge again, the poor old skivvy, world without end.

"I'll show you if I can be treated like dirt!" Miss Stanmore squealed. "I'll show you!" Then she turned and hobbled off again towards the room whence she had issued.

Danny had risen and was standing over at the kitchen sink again.

"Don't worry, Martha dear!" he called out to her. "Make the old pet her glass of brimstone. I'll get on with the washing in the meantime. Then I'll help you with the tea. Oh, yes, my dear, I insist. It's all my fault. I know it is. I'm terribly sorry, Martha. Have you any soap-flakes? This packet's empty."

CHAPTER SIX

I

THERE was no doubt about it, Danny was feeling lighter inside; and no wonder, too, considering the amount of steam he had let off. Rather funny he should unload it all on poor Martha, when he had one perfectly good mother and five stalwart aunts ranged round the

infield. Well, that's how things happen. She had been just right, dear old Martha, just the right person to talk to. He had talked when he wanted, and dried up when he wanted ; he had been bitter, or he had been maudlin, just as it came to him. For Martha was born to be put upon, and he had been quite unscrupulous. The Letford women quite definitely were not born to be put upon, not even his own mother, whom, with all respect, he thought the nicest of them, by far the nicest—excepting for Aunt Lavinia. And she was a dark horse, that one, she was probably nice, too, but you never really got to know her. There never had been much chance, for that matter.

Yes, he was feeling lighter inside, particularly now that he was doing something, even if it was washing up dishes on which the gravy had congealed. He was better when his hands were occupied ; he always had been—whether it was mud pies, or fixing butterflies, or building culverts. But it wasn't only that. What was it ? he asked himself again. He felt positively light-headed, and would have attributed it to the drink, if he had been drinking. But he hadn't. It was rocking. That was it. The rocking in the rocking-chair, like he used to do when he was a kid about Edward's age. Like Edward himself did on that last leave in nineteen hundred and thirty-nine, when he had been brought round to The Hazels, to be shown off, rather triumphantly, if the truth were known.

He tugged at the knife before it went in any deeper. Like Edward would do again some day, oh, please the Lord !

The afternoon glass of bread and milk had duly been served to dear Miss Stanmore, who, it was to be hoped, was duly mollified and had reconsidered her decision to leave that very day. Martha was busy getting jars out of the pantry, bestowing their contents into little dishes, cutting scones, preparing doilies for cake-dishes. She was all to pieces, the poor old dear, she kept on shaking her head and tut-tutting apprehensively.

"Martha dear !" exclaimed Danny. "I think I've put everything where it goes. Let me give you a hand with the tea."

"Oh, Master Danny, please, you mustn't bother ! They'll be in any moment now, and whatever Miss Letford will say if she sees you about the kitchen, I don't know. She'll say I called you in because I was too lazy to prepare it myself. Too many cooks, she always says, spoil the broth. So if you don't mind, please, Mr. Danny——"

He realzed it was no good arguing with her now. She was not the same Martha any more, the one who had listened with such delicate tact to his long outpourings.

"All right, my dear," he said. "You've been a brick, Martha, you know. I want to thank you."

"Yes, yes, Master Danny, of course." She was fumbling about in the baize-lined basket where the silver oddments were kept.

"Wherever can I have put the silver sugar-sifter? Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

He knew her mind was not with him or his griefs any more. He went up to her, gave her a loud kiss in the centre of the forehead, then left her to puzzle out where she'd put her sugar-sifter.

His attaché-case as ever in his hand, he walked along the passage that led towards the front door, aware, with something like surprise, that a grin was plastered across his face. And the cause of the grin was, of course, Miss Stanmore.

"The old harlot!" he said to himself rudely, and, he was certain, inaccurately. Whatever Miss Stanmore had been in all her many years, she had not been that. "I'm sorry the Fall of Malaya inconvenienced you," he condoled with her. He thought for a moment what fun it would be to go up to her door, open it, push his head in and call "Boo!" then pull it back again before she knew what day it was. But instead of doing that he found he had turned round and was walking up the staircase.

"Not the Dying Soldier!" he protested. "Oh, no, Danny! I couldn't stand that, you know!"

But he was not, he discovered, imposing that on himself. He walked a few yards along the first-floor landing, safely beyond Aunt Bertha's door, and realized he was climbing up the little flight of stairs which led up to the big front attic, the play-room.

At least it had been the play-room when he had been a small child, and doubtless had been the play-room of the Letford girls, if they had been allowed to do anything so frivolous as to play. It had then been a play-room predominantly, though there had always been a trunk or so in the dark corners. It was entirely a boxroom now. But it still retained vestiges both forlorn and substantial of its play-room era. There was above all the old rocking-horse. A rocking-horse is a plaything which time finds it almost impossible to destroy unless it calls in fire to aid it. His old scooter was still there, surely. And there were rails and waggons and things which even in his own childhood he had thought a little dreary, so that he had at no time had any idea of impounding them for the benefit of his own son, who was born into an age when toys had become much more dapper.

He opened the door. Yes, the old scooter was still there right enough, sticking out above the pedestal of a marble-topped wash-stand, which might have provided old Grandmother Letford with an adequate tombstone if her daughters had not already seen to the matter. Of course the scooter was there. Who should have moved it? So was the rocking-horse. So were the rails and waggons and things. So were the chests of drawers, the old trunks, the prep-school play-box, the sewing-machine which had gone wrong and never been put right again, the calf-bound sermons, the massive cruet-stand, the rolled lump of stair-carpet.

He closed the door behind him with exaggerated quietness, as if

he had become again for a brief spell the small boy he had once been, who used to enter that room in order to ride a Barbary steed across the desert, or build up a dream Crewe under the sloping eaves. It was fine inside there, alone with himself and his childhood. It was curious how far away he felt himself removed from all those aunts, including even the devastating Aunt Susan, including even Aunt Susan's mother, whom Susan had insisted on haling out so laboriously from her grave. Not at all a bad way to pass the time till the evening service gets under way, he thought. What a tea-party it's going to be, and in war-time, too! Talk about Lord Mayor's Banquets. Talk about a ceremonial dinner in the house of a rich *towkay*!

"Good old Jinny!" he exclaimed, making his way through the lumber towards the rocking-horse, and nearly knocking his eye out with the end of a broom his foot sent tilting up. "I wonder if she can still support me, if only I can find some place to put these long legs." He was charmed to find that Jinny's back did not buckle under his weight. Tugging at the dried-up strip of leather that still hung from her jaws, he swung to and fro for several minutes. "Yoicks!" he cried. "Tally-ho!" It was a bit dusty, he realized. Oh, well, you can't go cantering across the Arizona desert without picking up a little dust. The railway system was less satisfactory. The points just wouldn't fit into each other any more. He turned his attention to the books. Most were sermons, some were not. None was The *Adventures of Herr Baby*. He remembered how crazy he used to be about that book as a small boy. He remembered nothing at all about the book itself, nothing. It was his favourite book until suddenly *St. Winifred's: Or the World of School* swept everything before it, like a tidal wave; just as suddenly as, later, Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* swept *St. Winifred's* into limbo.

"I wonder what *The Adventures of Herr Baby* was all about," he mused. "It must have been about *something*. Good Lord, what a potty title!" He looked round among the heaped books, picked up the books that lay about singly on the floor. No *Herr Baby*. "I wonder if the damn thing's got into one of these trunks. What's in these things anyway?"

So Danny Mather started pottering around in the boxroom of the house where his mother and five aunts had been born, and, looking for *Herr Baby*, found a grandfather instead.

The photograph was in the second trunk he opened, a shiny black leather trunk, like a huge scarab. He found it way down underneath, under a mass of old dresses and a pillow or two and a few old account-books and some old shawls and slippers and what not.

"Hello, what's this?" Danny asked himself, as he felt the soft powdery edge of a piece of cardboard. "An old photograph, is it? Perhaps it shows Aunt Susan as a girl. Perhaps she was human once. Let's find out."

But the photograph didn't show any Aunt Susan or any aunt

anything as a girl. It was a very male photograph, no fewer than twelve males, and in that house! For one moment the balance as between the sexes at The Hazels got a nasty jolt. A second or two pulled the female side of the balance firmly down again. But, no doubt at all, it had had a nasty jolt.

It was a very faded photograph, but the ink of the legend printed on it in fine Victorian capitals was quite legible:

THE LETFORD CRICKET ELEVEN, 1873.

It bore the name of a photographer in Shrewsbury, where the Letford stock originally hailed from, as Danny dimly recalled.

There was, of course, a twelfth man, as if eleven men were not enough of an excitemen in The Hazels, even if only recorded in a photograph, and a photograph that went back to 1873. The Letford team started at about the age of fifteen, and went up to at least fifty. There were three schoolboys, wearing striped school blazers, short flannel knickerbockers and dark stockings. They lay stretched out on the green sward in front of their elders, picturesquely leaning upon their elbows. Behind them were three elderly, bearded Letfords, proud fathers, probably, of the nine others. The remaining six cricketers had side whiskers. They took up the rear, standing. They were young men of university age and upwards, from the late teens to the thirties, wearing their Old School or Varsity blazers. Five of the six wore cricket-caps, one a straw boater.

No sooner had Danny Mather set eyes upon the image of the cricketer in the straw boater than he knew he was gazing upon his grandfather, as far as he could see all that remained on this round globe of his grandfather, so determinedly had his offspring, or at least his eldest daughter, willed him into non-existence. For he gazed not only upon old grandfather Letford, he gazed upon himself. He knew now where he got the long legs and broad shoulders from, the ridged eyebrows, the cloven chin. In his early thirties, old man Letford had been a cricketer in Shrewsbury; he, Danny Mather, in his late twenties, had been a cricketer in the Malayan State of Selangor. But he had no doubt that they both swung their bats in exactly the same way, they were both pretty good in the outfield.

"Well, how d'you do, old boy?" murmured Danny Mather. "Didn't I say so? Didn't I say you were my sort of chap? Down there, I mean, while your devoted daughters were chattering away thirteen to the dozen? You look a bit of a rip, you know, with that boater and the old silk scarf and those creases in your flannels. I bet you were a one with the girls, you bad old man. You're ahead of me there, granddad. Helen's always been quite enough to keep me busy. Perhaps you'd have had less of a roving eye if you'd had a Helen, too. What do you think? I mean it must have been something to have a *Frau* with all the virtues I heard about this afternoon. My, what a dame! And what a lad!"

He sat there for many minutes gazing at the old man's likeness, and his own. There was not a shadow of a doubt in his mind this

was none other than his grandfather. The very place he found it in clinched the matter for him ; as if orders had at some time been given —surely by Aunt Susan—that every trace of old Letford should be expunged, and somebody at the last moment, finding it impossible not to preserve this one last vestige, had thrust the photograph away deep down into the bottom of the old trunk.

He grinned, he was in a good temper. The adventure in the ex-play-room had confirmed his oddly childish mood.

"There's nothing like making sure," he told himself. "You bet, I'll make sure." He went over to his famous attaché-case, opened it and laid the Letford Cricket Eleven down on the wallet containing the photographs of his wife and son. "Meet your great-granddad, Edward," he murmured. "He was a gay old bird," He closed the case again and moved to the door. "The ladies will have come back from their excursion," he considered. "This room needs a bit of a dusting. My throat's quite dry. I could do with a cup of tea myself."

II

The ladies were all back again. Really, you might have thought they had not been out at all, they were so comfortably and solidly dispersed into the chairs they had been occupying before they left for the churchyard. Danny remembered the appalled astonishment with which they had registered his appearance during luncheon. They were quite nonchalant about it now ; or, at least, unexcited. Aunt Susan, of course, took not the slightest notice of him. But Aunt Lavinia smiled, rather pleasantly and shyly, from behind her spectacles. Aunt Bertha smiled, too. The twins tittered. His mother held out her hand and pointed to a tuffet below her chair, which she had evidently prepared for him.

"Had a nice rest, darling?" she asked, under her breath. (Aunt Susan was talking, and evidently proposed to continue.) "Feeling better?"

"Yes, darling, feeling fine," he whispered, sitting beside her, the attaché-case against his feet.

Aunt Susan continued. The theme was, of course, her mother, whom she permitted to be also the mother of her sisters. But the theme had a new aspect, or at least one that had not entered the field of conversation during the lunch-time session. It was apparently a desire, and a comprehensible one, on the part of her daughters, that Mrs. Letford should be commemorated in the parish church at Westerleigh. It was perhaps a little odd that that should not have been done before now, seeing that the lady had been dead a full half-century. But there it was. She had not been. And it transpired that that was the object of that visit to the Vicar which had been mentioned earlier, when the six sisters were preparing to set off for the churchyard.

The Vicar, it seemed, had been charming, and most helpful. He would certainly have paid his respects in person that afternoon at The Hazels if he had not had the misfortune to slip on one of the brasses in the church pavement, and so was confined to the Vicarage for two or three days. He was a new Vicar, he had retired from a lifetime of devoted service in the East End, and had only taken over the living some five or six months ago. He had, of course, no personal knowledge of old Mrs. Letford; probably his two predecessors had not, either. But he was very well disposed to the idea of a commemoration of the mother of Miss Bertha Letford, of The Hazels, one of the staunchest pillars of his congregation, not to mention her sisters, whom he had the pleasure of meeting for the first time.

The question was what form was the monument to take. There was a discussion of several alternatives. A stone plaque in the chancel was the most simple and dignified, but there was a good deal to be said for a cross and a pair of brass candlesticks for the altar. Or even a new altar, if that could be managed between them. The idea of a stained-glass window was perhaps a little pompous, and very expensive, too; a good deal could be said for an oak Glastonbury chair in the sanctuary. The matter had not been decided at the Vicarage. In that same sense it was still not decided now, here at The Hazels. It pleased Aunt Susan to permit an illusion of democratic debate. Yet it was somehow coldly clear that, in fact, the monument was to take the form of a stone plaque in the chancel; not because it was the simplest or the most economical, but because it was the most explicit. A stone plaque could leave no doubt at all in the mind of anybody, living or dead, who was being thus commemorated.

"Perfectly so, old dear," the thought was ticking in Danny's mind. "Why shouldn't you put up a plaque for the old dame? But what I want to know is, what's the old boy done? What have you *got* against the old boy? Stop a minute! We're going too fast! You haven't admitted that such a creature as the old boy ever existed.

"Perhaps they kept him dark from you? How's that for an idea? But, honestly, he did exist, you know. Can I prove it? Oh, boy! Can I *prove* it!"

He had already brought his attaché-case up on to his knees. He was already thumbing the clasps. Good Lord, how awfully naughty he felt! It was talking to Martha. It was being in the play-room. It was rocking on the rocking-chair, sitting on the tuffet. Yes, he knew he was being very, very naughty.

He had the photograph out of the attaché-case. He put the case down on to the floor again.

"There's a man in our village," declared Aunt Susan, "who would make an excellent job of the lettering. He has been highly recommended to me. If we decided on the plaque——"

"But really, Aunt Susan," Danny heard himself saying. "I hate

butting in like this, but I should awfully like to know something about my old grandfather." He got up from the tuffet. There was a crashing silence. Aunt Lavinia peered up through her glasses, her mouth pursed. Aunt Bertha and the twins looked absolutely terrified, as if a naked savage had charged into the room, brandishing an assegai. A bright spot of shame leapt up in the centre of his mother's cheeks.

"I came across this photograph of the Letford Eleven in the play-room," declared Danny. He placed it on Aunt Susan's lap, and pointed with his finger. "Surely this is the old man, isn't it? The one in the boater. I'm his living image, aren't I? Come along, Aunt Susan, come clean!"

He felt his voice, thin and trivial, suspended high aloft in his skull. He felt dreadful. He waited. Involuntarily he lowered his head, as if the roof must come crashing down the next moment on the back of his skull.

Nothing so vehement happened. The old woman lifted the photograph from her knee as if it were an unclean thing, broke its back, then tore it in half. Then she flung the pieces away from her. She did not say a word. Her eyes burned with the most frightening hatred . . . a hatred not of the inept young man, evidently, who hardly existed for her more than the chairs in the room. It was a hatred for that man who must have been dead many years ago now, and had been her father.

"I'm ashamed of you, Danny!" This was his mother's voice. "How *could* you?" It was exactly as if he were, in fact, seven years old, and had behaved very naughtily indeed.

And, exactly as if he were seven years old, it seemed to him there was nothing he could do but leave the room. He was all to pieces. The silence disintegrated him more completely than the sharpest rebuke could have done. With a completely automatic movement, he took up his bag and moved off towards the door. It seemed an awful long way there, but he reached it at last. Then he turned the handle and went out into the hall. For a moment or two he could not quite remember which way the front door was, right or left; then he turned right, and was making for the front door, when he felt a hand, at once gentle but quite firm, seize him by the elbow.

"Danny, my boy, one moment!" a voice said. "Don't go! I want to talk to you!"

He turned. The vision cleared in his eyes a bit. It was Aunt Lavinia.

"I've been pretty bloody," he mumbled. "I suppose I could have waited. I think I ought to go." He was making for the front door again. "Tell mother I'll be there for that last train."

"Don't be so childish," his aunt ordered him. "I want to talk to you. You mustn't go away."

He stopped.

"Yes, aunt?"

"We'll go out into the garden," she said. "This way." She took him by the arm.

"Yes, aunt," he said again, and went along with her towards the door which led out into the long garden at the back of the house.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THERE was a rustic bench in a bay of the old brick wall that made the south boundary of the garden.

"I want you to sit down," said Aunt Lavinia. "Will you now, there's a dear." She sat down on the corner of the bench, so that she got its arm against her back. "That's better." He sat down, too. She turned to him. The lenses of her pince-nez twinkled as she moved.

"Danny, dear," she said. "I know you've got enough on your mind. I haven't had a chance to tell you what I feel, but I think you know. I don't have to talk."

"That's all right, aunt," he murmured.

She put out her hand and tenderly patted his. She let a brief silence hang between them, then she began.

"It's something else I've brought you out for. I've been feeling all day there are a few things you ought to know, and I've made up my mind to tell you about them. You see, dear, there are really only two people now living who can do that. I might even say there never were more than two people who knew everything—I mean *everything*. One is your Aunt Susan, and the other is me. As you can see, you're not likely to get anything out of Susan. . . . What? What do you say, Danny?"

"I only said I didn't propose to ask her," he mumbled.

"That's all right, dear, that's perfectly all right. I know you're not curious, but I feel the time has come when you ought to know *something* about your grandfather. However, that's not really why I've brought you out here." She waited, as if she fancied he wished to say something again. Then she went on, "As I was saying, you're not likely to get anything out of your Aunt Susan, so that leaves just me. Quite apart from it being war-time, who knows when we're going to meet again? I'm an old woman, Danny, dear."

"Don't talk like that," he protested. He was fond of the old woman, and that sort of talk embarrassed him. "I might pass out a long time before you do."

"We're all in God's hands," she said. "But the fact still remains I'm an old woman. And the funny thing is this, Danny—you may

be surprised to hear this—it's not for your grandfather's sake I want to talk to you. After all, he died a long time ago."

"When ?" he asked.

"Soon after our mother died," she said shortly.

Her voice sounded a little odd. He raised his eyes. Why shouldn't the old man die soon after his wife ? He let it go.

"All right."

"I say it's not for your grandfather's sake I made up my mind to talk to you. It's not even for yours. You can easily manage without knowing." She paused a moment. "It's for Aunt Susan's sake," she said.

His mouth set awkwardly.

"I'm not terribly interested," he said. "She's always treated me like dirt, and she hasn't been very civil to-day, has she ?"

"No, my dear. If you like, that's exactly why I've brought you out here. I'm not asking you to forgive her, exactly. After all, one doesn't ask a boy to go around forgiving an old lady of eighty-two." (Not so much of a boy, he thought. But we won't argue.) "All I want you to do is to understand. For my sake, Danny, if you like," she went on quietly, "though I know I haven't much claim on you."

"You're all right," he insisted.

"That's fine. Now we'll go on. It isn't easy. I mean it isn't easy to know where to begin. The whole thing goes back such a long time, so many, many years."

"She hates him !" Danny broke in suddenly. "My God, how that woman hates him ! As if he were alive to-day ! And he must have been dead an awful long time, whenever he died !"

"Yes, he died a long time ago. And yet it seems as if he only died today," she murmured. "That's the strange thing, Danny, about being old . . . that the things that happened a long time ago are recalled clearer than the things that are happening now. Yes, things go on happening all the time. One is aware of them, my sisters talking in the drawing-room inside there, you and me talking in the garden . . . yet somehow it seems as if these things were happening then rather than now, they seem to run into each other like two rivers."

Her own voice sounded like water, soft and far-off, a stream immemorably ancient flowing in a channel formed long ago in a buckling of the crust of the hills, yet the water is as fresh and clear as that morning's dew.

"Is she asleep ?" Danny asked himself. "Am I ? What's happening to me ? It comes of being with a lot of old women all day long. Oh, no, she's not asleep. She's very much wide-awake."

"Tell me one thing, aunt," he requested her.

"Yes ?"

"Do you hate him, too, the way Aunt Susan hates him ?"

"No, dear. I've never been the hating sort. I've never hated anyone."

"Why does she hate him so?"

"Yes, dear, yes. That is what I wish to tell you about. You have to understand the sort of man he was."

"Was he a decent sort?"

She smiled. It was the faintest ghost of a smile, and it was a sad one.

"No, Danny. One couldn't say that. He was an extremely attractive person."

"There you are," Danny exclaimed. As if he had been arguing, and had won a point. "I've been thinking about him all day."

"So have we all," she said.

"Well, that was damn clever of you all, I must say. You were all thinking about him, and you managed not to utter a single word about him, not one syllable."

"I'm not sure about Susan. I think it's possible she really managed to keep him completely outside her mind, as she's done for fifty years. I'm not sure. I can't say. She doesn't talk, even to me, and of course I don't ask her."

"We were talking about the old man," he reminded her. The subject was much more intriguing to him than the subject of his trap-mouthed and trap-minded eldest aunt.

"I'm glad you say he was all right. I had a sort of sneaking feeling that he was my sort of a chap. I felt he and I would have got on awfully well together—particularly when I came across that photograph of him in the old trunk . . . if I may refer to it again. What a lad! I said to myself."

She smiled and sighed.

"Oh, yes, I don't doubt you and he would have got on awfully well together. He got on well with all men, and with practically all women. He was a tremendous success everywhere."

"Well, then."

"You also said he was your sort of a chap. No, Danny, he wasn't. Not if I know you at all."

"What sort was he? Are you trying to hold anything back?"

"Not at all," she reproved him, "or we wouldn't be here, would we? He was completely unscrupulous with women. As I've said already, he was immensely attractive, and our mother adored him. She struggled hard against her love for him . . . her passion, her infatuation, whatever the right word is, but I don't suppose she ever got the better of it. She was a religious woman, and everyone thought well of her, and was very sorry for her. But nothing made up for the sort of time he gave her. He did not betray her only with women of their own class. He betrayed her with women of every type. He was quite insatiable. He was a satyr. That is to say he was, of course, a sick man."

"I see," breathed Danny. "I see." But he did not see. He found himself, as it were, on the edge of a plain, and the plain was invested with murky vapours that swirled and shifted and thickened.

In the plain beyond the valley whence he had issued, the air was crystal clear. You loved a girl, Helen being her name, and she loved you. And that was all you wanted, and all she wanted. But it had not been so, it seemed, with those earlier ones.

"I don't want to go into all that, Danny dear. I don't have to. I've never talked of it before with any human being, not even my husband. It just wasn't any concern of his. It certainly was quite impossible for my mother and me to talk about it, or for my mother and Susan. Susan and I have never discussed it from that day to this. As for your mother and Aunt Bertha, they must certainly have put two and two together. And the twins . . . I shouldn't be surprised if the twins don't know a thing to this day."

"Listen, Aunt Lavinia, the old boy's dead and gone a long time ago. Is it fair to dig him up again?"

She thought for some time. She sat rather like a little Buddha, with her finger-tips pressed close together, and her eyes shut.

"Of course we won't say another word on the matter, if you decide. I felt I wanted to talk to you, because I wanted to get Aunt Susan right in your mind."

"Would you say she's gone out of her way to get *me* right, Aunt Lavinia? After all, I've come back from Malaya just a bit knocked up by my Helen and Edward business. Would you say she's been very kind about that? Or any of you, for that matter?"

"No," she said. "We haven't. I admit that. But it's been bad luck. We weren't reckoning on your turning up. You turned up on a day which had been marked out as Susan's day for a long time. She began talking about it long before the war, and somehow we all felt we weren't going to let even the war get in its way. If anything, the war had made it even more inevitable. There we were, all six of us, still intact, and we'd not been together for fifty years, and it's extremely unlikely we'll ever manage it again. So we came to Westerleigh."

"Wouldn't our flat in town have been more convenient?"

"Don't be silly," she reproached him. "It's the fiftieth anniversary of mother's death. It had to be Westerleigh."

"Of course," he said. "It was just my luck to come barging in."

Her voice softened.

"It must have been deadly for you, all us old women chattering away. But you're young, Danny. Your day will come to-morrow, or the day after."

"There can only be one day for me," he answered.

"Yes," she whispered. "Pray the Lord it comes soon." She said no more. This time she waited for him to speak, and waited a long time.

"You're a decent old stick, aunt," he said. "I've always felt as much, though we haven't had much to do with each other, have we?"

She smiled.

"It's a long time since anyone paid me a compliment."

"A decent old stick," he confirmed. "About this Aunt Susan business—you're funny, you know."

"Not funny," she said. The smile was not in her face now.

"Why, aunt? I want you to go on, but why does it mean anything to you to tell *me* about it? It's all so very long ago and so far away."

"Danny, let me tell you something."

"Go ahead, aunt."

"You know when you came in to-day, so unexpectedly? None of us had the faintest idea you were within a thousand miles."

"Yes?"

"You got the impression we were a bit startled?"

"A bit startled? I thought you'd all drop through the floor. You looked as if you'd seen a ghost."

"We had."

"Come off it, aunt."

"I'll tell you. The last time the six of us were together was that day of our mother's funeral exactly fifty years ago. You know that."

"Yes. That was made quite clear."

"The same thing happened then. Someone came in on us unexpectedly. That time it was our father."

"What do you mean?"

"Our father and mother had been separated for several years. We hadn't any idea where he was. I suppose the lawyers got into touch with him and told him about mother's death. Anyhow, he certainly didn't send us a word of any sort. He just turned up, completely without warning, exactly as you did."

"Phew!" Danny whistled. "I see, aunt dear, I see. No wonder you all got a bit of a turn."

"Yes, no wonder."

"It must have knocked you all back a bit."

"You're quite right. He was drunk, and extremely offensive. It was quite dreadful."

"Good God, yes! It must have been! Good Lord, yes! No wonder you winced a bit when I came marching in! What on earth happened then?"

"We tried for a time to pretend he wasn't there, or at least to pretend he wasn't drunk. It was an odious situation."

"He came in . . . at the end of the festivities, so to speak?"

"Oh, no, quite early on."

"But listen, aunt! From Aunt Susan's description of the occasion, one gets the impression it was all dreadfully prim and respectable. All those Pumphrey-Sandhursts and what-not!"

"They were there, but it wasn't like that. It was odious. I tell you."

"Well, what on earth were you all going on about this afternoon? It sounds mad."

"It is a bit," she agreed placidly. "It's part of the fantasy—I

think that's the word you young people use—that Aunt Susan has built up across the years. The rest of us have almost convinced ourselves it's true."

"My hat!" marvelled Danny. "You are a gang of sisters!"

"Well, of course, we'd all rather it had really been like that."

"Yes, of course. Well, what actually happened?"

"When he'd been carrying on for some time—he had a very acid tongue when he was drunk—Susan suddenly lost control of herself. She said something extremely insulting. I don't need to repeat it. She can lash out, too, if she wishes to."

"Yes, I understand she can."

"He was drunk, but she got him. His face flared up like a schoolgirl's. He went up to her and slapped her face. She was over thirty at the time."

"I see, I see," he breathed. "That's the thing she's had against him all these years? In front of you all—all those people! That's why she's hated him like that! Poor old Susan!"

"No!" Lavinia said sharply. "No!" He was quite startled at the sharpness of her voice. "It wasn't that!"

"Oh!" He didn't know quite where he was now.

"She could have got over that long ago! It was something far more dreadful!"

A cold chill went to his heart. Was it quite fair to him, he wondered, that he should be brought into old churchyards like this, to go paddling among dead men's bones? He had heard enough. He would have given anything to be let off now. He would have liked to go mooching around in the long flower-border to see how Aunt Bertha's blue poppies were doing and the pied peonies, she was always good on them. Or he might chuck himself down on the lawn, warm with the sun, to look up into the branches of the big acacia, where the birds were carrying on, singing their heads off.

"It's not fair to Susan she should die," Lavinia went on, "with no explanation left behind of how the thing got hold of her mind. If I don't tell you know, Danny, nobody will ever know. It will be as if she had lived and died in a madhouse. I won't have it."

He said nothing. It was up to her now.

"It happened one spring day a year or two before they separated. We had all left the house. Your grandfather declared he had to go north on business. Your grandmother and the rest of us went off to spend a week in Bournemouth. We were all as a family sensitive to the smell of new paint, and we took the opportunity to get away from it till the worst was over. While we were away, Susan and I were called back suddenly to Westerleigh to come to the bed of a dear friend of ours who had had an accident and lay dying, and had asked for us. We went straight from the station to The Hazels to get into other clothes. As we went upstairs we heard a noise in our mother's bedroom. I was frightened, but Susan was not. She went up to the door and I followed her. Your grandfather had not even

taken the precaution of locking it. I could not tell you, and there is no need to, of the obscenity we saw . . . in our mother's room. He might have spared her that." The old lady had her hand up to her eyes, as if to shield them now, so many years later, from the evocation of the thing she had witnessed. "It was something that tore up our life from its roots. Your Aunt Susan developed a horror of men which has increased through the years, and become . . . I won't talk of it. I left home almost immediately and wasted no time in getting married. I might have done worse. I had a great many children, as you know. I felt I could stifle the memory that way, and I have been successful.

"That is what happened, Danny. You must try to forgive her. She has not been altogether to blame."

Danny rose, moved down the garden path, and stationed himself on the lawn with his back to his aunt. Then, being as a rule punctilious in this sort of thing, he turned his head and asked her pardon. She nodded. Then he stood as before, his back turned towards her and his head bowed. The desire had gone from him to go pottering about in the long flower-bed, or to chuck himself down on the lawn, disentangling the bird-noises. There was no cloud across the sun, so far as he could see; but the air was darker somehow.

He heard a sound behind him. He turned, and saw that his aunt had risen.

"Aunt Lavinia," he begged, "please don't go. I'm rather confused. I want to straighten things out a bit."

"Yes, my dear." She sat down again. "Whatever you wish to know."

The words came in a rush out of his mouth.

"What the devil are you all doing in this house? It seems to me to be mad."

"I quite agree," she admitted. "It's not a bit sensible. Aunt Susan wanted it, and that was all there was to it."

He raised his eyes.

"All there was to it? I don't get you. She seems to treat you all exactly as she treated me. She treats you like dirt."

"No. Her tongue's a bit sharp, we all know that . . . but she's a very old lady. I don't expect you to believe it, but she's been quite marvellous to us all these years. And to many other people, too. No one will ever know how kind she's been."

"I take your word for it," he said grimly. "But I still can't understand why you all came rushing back here, to The Hazels, where all those awful things happened. I should have thought you'd all have cleared out, and never shown up again."

"We did, my dear. After our mother's funeral, we went to stay with one of our Gilchrist aunts while we took stock of things. The house had been part of our mother's marriage-settlement, and the lawyers arranged to let it furnished. In a few weeks the younger girls went to school, and a month or two after that I got married.

Aunt Susan, as you know, went to do social work in the Liverpool slums."

"Yes, vaguely I know all that. But you were back in the house before I was born. At least, Aunt Bertha was."

"Bertha was, of course, an incurable old maid, even in her twenties. So were the twins. I think that was largely the influence of their eldest sister. By the time she was thirty Bertha knew exactly what she wanted to do, the very thing she is doing. She loved old ladies, and they loved her. She wanted them round her, to cosset her and be cosseted. She called it a Guest House."

"She was jolly decent to me when I was a kid, and mother was abroad."

"Of course she was. She's a dear. She has a heart of gold. So the idea was put up to Aunt Susan. Everything was always put up to Aunt Susan."

"I know."

"And Aunt Susan approved. The thing to decide then was where the Guest House was to be. Then, to everyone's astonishment, Susan announced it was going to be The Hazels. The lease was falling in, she said, and it was time the family went back to our mother's house. The place would be ideal for a Guest House, and we had all our local connections. If the lease had had another ten years to run, she'd have arranged temporary premises for Bertha's Guest House, and moved it all ten years later, lock, stock and barrel. If your Aunt Susan makes up her mind to do a thing, you know, she does it."

"I've noticed that. She made up her mind to get me out of the country, and I went."

"Perhaps she was a bit managing from time to time," she conceded. "Well, that's how we came back to The Hazels."

"But, aunt dear, it was not only your mother's house. It was your father's, too."

"I'm afraid I haven't made you understand. She's devoted all her life, all her tremendous will-power, to blotting him out, to making it seem he'd never been there at all."

"I see. It seems to me there's been something more than that behind it."

"What do you mean, Danny?" There was anxiety in her tone. She peered at him hard through her glasses.

"You love your sister. I think it's fine of you."

"What do you want to say?"

"I've not had time to think all this out. It's pretty new to me. But I see it in a different way from you, Aunt Lavinia." There was apprehension in the glint of her pince-nez. "To-day's business, for instance, this annniversary of the funeral."

"It was very beautiful. We all think so."

"Do you?" He stared straight into her eyes. She made a gesture with her hands as if to brush away his inquisition. "It seems

to me it was all . . . how shall I put it? . . . a very elaborate revenge on her father. I'm sorry if I distress you, aunt. You were candid with me, weren't you?"

"You're a good boy, Danny," she said. "It all happened all these long years ago, but, do you know? . . . I've seen him look just as you do now."

"I shouldn't be surprised," he murmured. "I mean, if you look at that photograph. . . ." He was still not happy, thinking of that photograph. He changed the subject. "Oh, by the way. You said he died after your mother died. Was there any trouble later on? I mean—was he awkward with any of you?"

"No."

"How much longer did he live on?"

She paused. Her finger-tips played nervously with each other.

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said, "if you don't mind." There was real trouble in her voice. She looked tired all of a sudden. After all, it must have been a pretty gruelling experience for her, digging so deep down after all these years.

"I'm sorry, aunt," he said. "I'm sorry. And I'm grateful to you. You've been a brick." He would end on a lighter tone. "I'm glad he played cricket, anyhow."

She looked up at him gratefully.

"He played very nicely. He often used to carry his bat through. What time is it, Danny dear?"

"Good Lord, aunt! It's miles past tea-time. I really can't keep you any longer from your tea."

"Yes, dear. I do think I ought to go and join the others now. You will think of what I've been saying, won't you, Danny?"

"Yes, aunt."

"Thank you, Danny. Don't you think you might come in, too? You'll need some tea before you go back to town, you know."

"I was pretty frightful, wasn't I?"

"We'll all pretend nothing happened. I'm sure that's the best thing to do. Hello, here's your mother come to call us. Hello, Angela! We're coming! Have we kept tea waiting? Is everybody very cross?"

Angela came down the garden path.

"Come along, Lavinia, Danny. Your tea will be black as ink."

Lavinia moved away to leave them together.

"Now, Angela dear, you won't start on him, will you?" she called out, smiling from the garden steps. "The poor boy won't know whether he's on his head or his heels."

Angela smiled back.

"We'll let him down lightly," she announced. "Danny, dear, you are coming in, aren't you?"

"If you think it's all right," he said.

"Of course it is. You'll forgive me talking the way I did, won't you, darling? As if you were a naughty little boy."

"I was rather, wasn't I?"

"You're overtired. It won't be long before we're going home now. You'll have a good long sleep, and then you'll tell me all about . . . everything."

"Mother dear, may I follow you in? I think I'd like one cigarette out here. Aunt Lavinia!" he called out after her. She had not yet disappeared into the house. She stood there waiting. "You are an old darling!" he proclaimed.

She smiled and bowed. She was such a dumpy little thing, the effect was quite comic. Her face lit up, and she went in.

"I'll be in in five minutes, mother," he assured her.

"Yes, dear," she murmured. She kissed him gently on the forehead, and left him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

To be able to take calmly the fact that Miss Potts was about to appear you required a certain amount of notice. Even when you had notice, she gave you a bit of a turn. But when she popped out of a passage with a finger at her mouth saying "Shush!" it was quite startling.

"You quite startled me!" Danny, in fact, informed her.

"Shush!" said Miss Potts once again. "Look! I'd . . . awfully like you to come in . . . and . . . won't you come into my room a moment, Danny?"

But there was no arguing about it. She had hold of him by the forearm and was pulling him along to her room, that faced across the passage from Miss Stanmore's room. A moment later the door was closed behind him.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "How nice it is to have you to myself for a moment! They won't mind . . . will they? I don't care if they do," she pouted, and shook her head. The long jet earrings tinkled. The bracelets clashed upon her arm.

"It's very nice to see you, Miss Potts."

"You're not looking at all well, Danny," she reproved him. "You look as if you're dying."

One got the impression her professional duty imposed upon her such prodigies of tact with the elderly female guests, she relished

saying exactly what she felt for a change, all the more seeing that the sufferer was masculine.

"I'll last as long as I need to," Danny asserted.

"My dear . . . what was she saying to you . . . out in the garden there?" Her face was tense with curiosity.

The directness of the inquiry took his breath away.

"We were . . . just talking," he said awkwardly. A flutter of annoyance beat inside him. What on earth had happened to the old thing? Had she developed still another religion, one that required the devotees to poke their noses into other people's business? She got all the religions, one after the other. She had been a Bahai, a Muslin, a Theosophist, a Christian Scientist, a Grouper. Poor old lady, in none had she found a haven for that distracted bosom!

"I know . . . I know exactly what you were . . . talking about!" The breath came so catchily it was half-way to a death-rattle. "You were talking about their father!"

His head whirled. What on earth was it all about? Why was everybody suddenly getting things off their chest, as if everybody was going to die before the night was out?

"As a matter of fact, Miss Potts, we were. But honestly, old dear, I don't see what it has to do with you. Forgive me for saying so. I really ought to be going in to tea, you know."

"You must stay and have a cigarette . . . one cigarette. I shall be mortally offended . . . if you don't." She brought out a cigarette-box of some fretted eastern wood. "Turkish! Do you like it? Smells nice, I think."

He hated Turkish cigarettes.

"Awfully kind of you!" he mumbled. "I'll have a puff or two."

"After all," she explained, "I've brought you up, if anybody has. Other people get the credit . . . but I did most of the work." ("Dear me!" he said to himself. "I didn't know anybody gave anybody credit on that score! Isn't that nice to know!" But it seemed as if he was being led to the brink of some ancient controversy, and it didn't interest him.) "So I don't see," she went on, "why I shouldn't take up a minute or two of your time." She sounded quite lachrymose.

"It's all right by me, but they've made an awful lot of fuss about this tea. Besides, there's a train to catch!"

"If you catch it!" she said, with an almost eldritch cackle. She put her finger to the side of her nose. "There are always things cropping up to prevent people catching trains!" She looked, at that moment, like one of the witches in Macbeth who had gone straight from the blasted heath to Elizabeth Arden, and Miss Arden hadn't made a very good job of her.

"I'll catch it right enough!" he said grimly. "I've got some people to chase in town to-morrow morning!" He spoke more

grimly than he felt. It was as if a cold finger had touched very lightly on the back of his neck.

She had fallen into that haggish vein, and continued in it.

"They think . . . people have forgotten!" she said. "Ha! ha! ha! Not a bit! If they only knew what I know!"

"I don't know what's come over you, Miss Potts, honestly I don't! It doesn't concern me very much, and I don't see that it concerns you!"

"They think they're going to get . . . that memorial in the church! They do, do they? Ho, they'll see!" Her body shook in the gust of her amusement and all the jewellery rattled, like a travelling tinker's cart. "She thinks because he's new to Westerleigh, he doesn't know a single thing. Well, she'll find out she's mistaken!"

He opened his eyes wide. Who the devil was she talking about now? Aunt Bertha, was it? Or could it be Aunt Susan? All roads led to Aunt Susan.

"Do you think . . . I've been satisfied . . . to look after old ladies all these years?" she turned on him suddenly. (But who said she *had* been? Who'd given the matter a thought either way?) "I could have been married, too! Yes, smile! You don't believe me, do you? But she saw to it! Oh no! It didn't suit her plans at all!"

Who? Susan? Bertha?

Was Miss Potts a bit drunk? It was, after all, an occasion; a fiftieth anniversary of a funeral. Did she keep a half-bottle of gin in the bookcase behind the Bahai Scriptures?

"I hate her!" she proclaimed. Her eyes glittered like turned sequins.

It *must* be Susan. Even poor old Miss Potts had not been immune from that diabolic system of remote control.

"You wouldn't believe it," she insisted. The quality of the voice had suddenly changed. It had been harsh and strident, consonant with the warts, the lines of her brow and jaw. It was dulcet now, maidenly. "Would you believe it . . . if I told you . . . that when I was a girl in Weston-super-Mare . . . a man took rooms in my boarding-house . . . especially to get into conversation with me . . . he was working for the white slave traffic?" She turned away from him, as if to hide a tear, or to lift a book or something from the shelf behind his head.

He wondered if that was the place where the half-bottle of gin was. He wondered if the long years of sterility had brewed a phial of a more delusive liquor, which she sipped, now and again, when the world became odious for her.

He stubbed out his cigarette and rose.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Potts," he said gently, "I do think I ought to be going in." He patted her back. "Perhaps we'll talk these things over another time, shall we?"

She did not utter a word, or turn her head.

"So long. Miss Potts," he breathed, and went off.

Tea was well under way when Danny at last joined the six ladies. It was a substantial tea, but it was not dinner, so one did not sit up to the table for it. It was tea, a matter of chairs and tea-cups and plates balanced on laps, though one was permitted small side-tables The buffet system would have been convenient, but it lacked dignity. That tea-party did not, with those pagodas of silver furniture ranked on that massive two-handled tray.

I wonder, mused Danny, should a chap tell the old lady he's sorry? Or should he take a leaf out of the old lady's book and just pretend the Incident never took place.

That's going to be the way of it, he told himself with satisfaction, as he put his bag down. There was positively a smile on old Susan's face. Well, it was going too far to call it a smile, but definitely the face had relaxed.

"Better late than never," Aunt Bertha wagged her finger at Danny rather archly. "Add a little hot water to the tea, Mona dear —or shall we make you some fresh?"

No, no, Aunt Bertha was not to bother.

"Sit down beside me, darling," his mother bade him, "on this nice high tuffet. You'd better make a good tea while you can. I don't think there's very much stock at home in the larder."

"Milk *and* sugar?" asked Aunt Edie sweetly, sensitive as ever to a change in the atmosphere.

Just milk would do, thanks.

"You simply must have some of the toasted scones, if they've not gone too hard," insisted Aunt Bertha. "And do try that home-made currant cake."

Aunt Mona fluttered round with the silver toast-dish

"Toast, Danny dear?"

It was positively revolutionary, the way those six ladies, or five of them at least, permitted themselves to be aware of the male in their midst. It was gratifying, too. But it did not last long. That would have been too much. In a matter of minutes Aunt Mona ceased her flutterings and was back on her chair again. Aunt Bertha did not notice that, after all, he had not tried the home-made currant cake. He got up and helped himself. The fact that he had gone over to the silver tray and back again did not impinge on the consciousness of the six aunts. His mother had become an aunt again. The spell had fallen on them all.

No wonder the shadow of a smile lurked in the corners of Aunt Susan's mouth. She had them all where she wanted them—her sisters, her dead father, her sister's living son. She would soon have her mother where she wanted her, recorded in plain and permanent capitals in a wall of the Westerleigh Parish Church. She was well content.

They were telling tales of their girlhood again. Aunt Susan was less vocal than she had been at luncheon; it was enough for her to guide the reminiscences along the channels she had contrived for

them. She had had a good day. There had been one or two unanticipated irritations, but in the long span of her life she had met others, and had outlived them.

The resentfulness had gone out of Danny's heart. The daughter had wiped out the father like pencil-marks from a slate. Well, she had had a tough time. Possibly so had the father, too, his grandfather the cricketer. It was a bit late in the day to try and find out what had made him carry on like that. It was conceivable that his wife—Susan's mother, after all—had been a handful of something in her way.

Oh, hell, he, Danny, wasn't going to take sides at this late day! What did it matter, anyway, and to whom? Excepting, of course, to Susan? According to Lavinia, the five other daughters weren't really interested. They were putting on an act for Susan's sake. Well, it wasn't taking too much out of their lives, one day out of fifty years.

Fifty years! An awful lot had happened since then. He went up to the silver tray and helped himself to a sandwich, and sat down again. An awful lot was going on this very day. After all, there was a war on, a good-sized war. There was one thing about being at The Hazels surrounded by a bevy of aunts, it took your mind off the war an hour or two at a time.

Did it?

You never really for one moment stopped thinking of Helen and Edward, and it was the war that had swept them from the earth and kept them hidden in a cloud of smoke and mystery and terror. It was another sort of war the old ladies made you lose sight of in The Hazels, as they themselves had conspired to lose sight of it for twenty-four hours. The war at your doorstep, you might call it. In a few hours they would all step back into it again, the war of ration-cards, air-raid alerts, black-outs, the nine o'clock news.

And yet . . . and yet . . . there was no point in deceiving yourself. The war was going on just the same, beyond that window, up in those skies.

"*Lef', lef'—lef', ri', lef' !*" A squad of soldiers in full kit was being marched along the road this side of the green. They looked pretty tired, as if they had been given a good long dose. "Wilkins, pick up those bleeden' legs, or I'll pick them up for you! *Lef', lef'—lef', ri', lef' !*"

On the other side of the green, a handful of luckier soldiers were drifting through the doors of the Barleycorn. Yes, they were wearing ties and those odd hats. They were Americans. There must be an American camp round here. Danny wouldn't have minded a drink himself. Did they still make Barley Wine in England? A couple of camouflaged military lorries came hurtling in from the Steyning Road and went hurtling on west towards Horsham. The teeth must have rattled in the skulls of the old folk under the churchyard slabs.

They probably gave old Grandmother Letford quite a turn (she was, of course, a Gilchrist before her marriage, you know). A flight of planes droned by overhead. A girl in some khaki uniform pedalled by on her bicycle. You could see she had nice legs at any distance. "Yoo-hoo!" yodelled a couple of American lads leaning up against the big chestnut tree near the house. A small convoy of cars, about five, came into the picture, driving west to east, beyond the Barleycorn, beyond the houses that faced The Hazels, to the furthest corner of the green, where they turned up a side-road that branched out on to a stretch of common. There they parked, and the occupants came back to one of the houses opposite. There were posters and things on the gate and windows of the house. It was the headquarters of some local war activity. "Yoo-hoo!" yodelled the American lads again. Another girl had appeared on the scene. Her legs were not so visible, and perhaps not so good, but they were worth a tentative "yoo-hoo!"

The war was like a wave, and it had hold of him again, and there was no footing for him any more. Intermittently and briefly, during the day which was now sloping towards evening, he had found footing in a day which had passed from the earth fifty years ago. He had not enjoyed the experience, though it had been a day and a world of the time before the wars. It had involved for him incredulity and contrition and sour laughter. He was neck-deep in the war again, in Westerleigh and London, in Libya, in New Guinea. There had been a war in Java and Malaya, too. That war, for the time being, had been left high and dry.

"*Lef', lef'—lef', ri', lef'!*" the sergeants were calling out to the marching squads across the continents. "Head up and swing those arms!" "Yoo-hoo!" yodelled the American boys. "Heil Hitler!" barked the German boys. "Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!" chanted the Japanese boys as they came up through the rubber plantation on to the road that led south to Kuala Lumpur.

"I never could quite understand it myself," Aunt Bertha was saying. "He was a Commander in our Navy, yet his father was a Portuguese. I believe he spent all his holidays in Portugal as a small boy."

"But Stasia was terribly nice!" insisted Mona. "She had the most beautiful flaxen hair. She can't have had a drop of Portuguese blood in her veins!"

"And what if she had?" inquired Lavinia. "I once knew a Mexican lady—I think she said she came from . . . no, I couldn't pronounce the name even if I remembered——"

How thin and far their voices were, like flies buzzing on the far side of window-panes. He leaned up from the tuffet he sat on towards his mother's knees, but it was almost as if she were not there, or were some inanimate piece of furniture, so little comfort was to be had from her. He shook his head, as if he might thus expel the sorrow that was going up like a smoke through his nostrils

and circling within his head. Not only a smoke going up, it was a buzzing, too, as if an insect were captive there.

He was wrong. It was not a noise within the skull. If it were, it would not be so loud that others could hear it. His mother, too, turned her head, and one of the others. The sound was from without from the upper air. Then the sound deepened and broadened, it became a roar, the roar of an aeroplane swooping in low. The others had their heads raised, they were staring out through the window now.

There was a division of time, infinitely remote, in which he perceived as separate units of the universe the line of five cars strung out upon the common, the bomb descending upon it, with such controlled precision it might have been his own appalled and fascinated mind that compelled the missile to come down upon the central point of the target, if target it were.

Then there was nothing but fire and thunder, the black dazzle of debris flung high, falling again, upon the Sussex common, the village green, hawthorn and eldertree, duckpond and nest of starlings, bloom of poppy and red clover. But in the mind of Danny Mather the explosion, the fire and thunder, were in another landscape. On the road that lined the twined darkness of the Malayan jungle the lorry burst into flame, crackled like a huge pyre of bone-dry wood. The Austin not many yards in its rear leapt like a colt into the air and came down upon the roadway with its spine broken.

"Mummy! Mummy! Where are you?" he heard a small boy crying out of the heat and terror.

No voice replied.

In the front of the car a woman's body burned, a lump of fuel among the burning woodwork and upholstery and luggage.

"Mummy, where are you?"

A small boy with staring eyes runs out into the edge of the jungle, into the tangle of thorn and creeper. The hair on the woman's body is consumed, the skin burned away, the bones are beginning to melt like glue in the extreme heat.

There was a morning at the General Hospital at Johore, Bahru, during the search for the other woman, the one that was not eaten by the fire. A glimpse of a merchant seaman who had been somehow rescued from the sea of burning oil at the centre of which, he, too, had been burning. A glimpse of the charred and wrinkled face. The voice dimly babbling out of the mummy bandages.

Better a thousand times she should be dead than alive like this.

"Mummy! Where are you?"

The small boy crying in the jungle. . . .

"Helen! Helen! Oh, Helen! Helen!" the man cried, fallen across his mother's lap, sobbing as mournfully as if he were himself that small boy, his own son, sobbing as if now, surely, his heart must break, if it were not already broken. After the long months of the

tension and the agony that had culminated in this cadaverous and frustrated day, the restraints were gone, the last frayed thread was broken, he was a child sobbing in his mother's lap.

This continued for a minute, or two minutes, or more. The six Letford sisters collected themselves. Bertha and Mona picked themselves up from behind the easy chair where they had taken refuge. Edie was tittering anxiously as if somebody had been taking rather dubious liberties with her.

"An air-raid," she was saying. "An air-raid! Tee-hee-hee! But it's all right now!"

Yes, there had been an air-raid, or perhaps not quite that, a casual sneak raider coming in low and dropping a solitary bomb. And yes, it was all right now. Perhaps it was not much of a bomb, perhaps a fifty-pounder. Nothing much had happened in The Hazels, at all events, in the drawing-room here. The windows were cracked, one or two had holes, and plaster was lying about on the carpet, on the furniture, among the silver things on the tea-tray.

"Oh, *poor* Miss Stanmore!" Aunt Bertha was saying. "Poor dear Miss Stanmore! I do hope she's all right!" But she made no effort to find out, doubtless Miss Potts would do that. She was panting as if she had been running up and down stairs. She had a swinging scapula and this excitement was no good for her.

Aunt Lavinia leaned far forward on the edge of the chair, her hands before her face. She looked like one praying, like one who thanked the Lord for the deliverance He had vouchsafed; like one who begged the Lord that whatever pain had been caused by this latest wickedness should be as light, and assuaged as soon, as He in His wisdom deemed proper.

Angela Mather was stooped over her son, her hands passing again and again through his hair.

"There now, Danny! There now!" she was saying softly: "All will be well, Danny! There now!" But she made no effort to stop the fountain of his tears. It was better that at last the tears should flow.

As for Aunt Susan, now, some three or four minutes after the bomb had exploded, she sat back in her winged upright easy chair exactly as she had been sitting there some three or four minutes before; as she might have been sitting there, you could have said to yourself, some decades before that, a High Priestess of Victorian England—excepting that in that earlier epoch there would have been no flakes of fallen plaster in her hair. The tremor had done more than that. It had hurled from the small table beside her her tea-plate and cup and saucer. But she had bent down at once, and retrieved them, and placed them again on the small table, as if one of the Pekinese had tipped the table over as she frisked by.

So now, apart from the flakes of plaster in her hair, all was as

before with Aunt Susan. And she was speaking, as she had not been doing much during the later stages of the tea-party.

"I've had my suspicions ever since I read the accounts," she was saying. "Now I know. It's plain for anyone to see exactly what happened in Malaya." She was staring towards her sister's son, sobbing over her sister's knee. Her lip twisted contemptuously. "That's why Malaya fell. They were a pack of snivelling cowards, the Army, the Civil Service, the whole lot of them. They couldn't stand and take it, as they used to in the old days, when they built an Empire. The only thing these creatures could do was to lose it. They turned tail. Look at him. Now you can see exactly what happened, and why it happened."

It was upon those words that Danny returned from the agony on the edge of the jungle to a consciousness of present time and place. The sobbing diminished in his throat. There was incredulity first, a white blank incredulity, as the words of the old woman filled out with meaning.

"I don't suppose there has ever been so disgraceful a spectacle in the annals of the British Empire. What is the revolting word they use nowadays? The word is 'sissies' I think!"

He was conscious of some violent word and gesture of protest on the part of his mother. There was also a word or two of protest from somewhere a few feet away. But those were not the voices he heard most clearly. He heard a great murmur of voices from across the seas—Argylls, Australians, Sikhs, East Surreys, Gurkhas, Manchesters; sailors in their bombed ships, airmen in their aircraft blazing and falling apart, doctors and nurses in smouldering hospitals. A murmur of voices protesting humorously or angrily. The Cockney soldier dying among the mangrove roots—the vision of him came back always, always.

"It ain't 'arf a lark, you know. 'Ere was we sweating for two bleedin' years over in Camberley." The skin above the cheekbones was pure and translucent as alabaster, so that the blood drooling from the side of the mouth was all the more startlingly scarlet. "Good old Islington; wish I was there now, guv'nor."

The anger came roaring like a flood along Danny's veins, an impersonal thing, outside his own hurt or insult. He rose from besides his mother's knees, turned and faced the old woman, and strode toward her. His left arm was flung back, the palm of his hand stiff and wide open.

So it had been on this day, exactly fifty years ago, a man strode towards this same woman sitting in this same room, to slap her face, and had slapped it; the man being this woman's father, not her sister's son. To the sisters staring wide-eyed on the young man advancing, for the second time that day the young man seemed more a ghost than a mortal. Everything stood still, the pulses in their ears, the heart-beats behind their ribs. They were girls and they

were old women, the past was now, the present had always been.

The young man did not advance so far as the old woman in the chair. She was, after all, old, and a woman. He was, also, of a finer texture than the other had been. He stopped. He caught a glint through the corner of his eye of the gleam of silver, the silver of that monumental tea-tray with the shining things piled upon it. The anger was roaring undiminished in his skull. He flung himself over to the tray, seized it by the heavy chased handles, lifted it into the air, the solid and pompous weight of it, then sent it crashing to the ground.

"You wicked old woman!" he cried. "God damn you!" He turned and went hurtling towards the door. He heard nothing of his mother calling after him, of the dogs barking themselves sick with rage, of doors banging within, of fire-engines clanging without. He knew only he was now out on the garden path, now he had flung himself beyond the garden gate. He was out on the village green now, his face turned towards the public-house beyond there, the Barleycorn.

"God Almighty!" his lips were shaping. "I think I can stand myself a drink now."

CHAPTER NINE

THE Barleycorn was further away from the explosion than The Hazels, and there were a number of houses in between that had absorbed the blast. So the Barleycorn was all right, except for a few flakes of plaster down and a couple of glasses that had fallen off ledges. Of course, practically everybody rushed out of the place to see what had happened, and to give a hand if necessary; particularly the Americans, to most of whom it was their first bomb.

But the Barleycorn carried on, as most of the English public-houses, and business premises, and private households, had carried on during considerably fiercer aerial excitements. The ivory handles descended, the beer foamed into the glasses, the ivory handles were up again. England was like that.

When Danny entered the public-house, the anger was beating and flapping about inside him like a huge fish in a net. It was a pity in one way that his mind wasn't calmer; there was a certain amount of enjoyment to be got out of entering the portals of the Barleycorn for the first time in his life. As a small boy staying at The Hazels

during the holidays he had been made to feel it was as much out-of-bounds as, say, a leper-camp. When he returned to Westerleigh after he was grown up, he refrained from entering the place. There was no point in making an issue of it, and there were other public-houses not commanded by the windows of The Hazels.

He was in too much of a state to know which of the three bars he was entering, the Public, the Private, the Saloon. It happened to be the Saloon. It would have been all one to him if the place had been full or empty.. As a matter of fact everyone had gone out, excepting a woman whom he did not see for quite some time. She was sitting alone in an alcove, behind a small table, with a whisky-and-soda before her. He went over to the bar. You could see beyond a partition to an inferior bar, where two yokels stood on one side of the counter and the landlord on the other. The yokels stood there as if they had been standing in those same clothes, in that same position, ever since the sign of the Barleycorn was painted, about a century ago. The landlord was filling their glasses for them.

"It were only an old shard!" said one yokel, with infinite prolongation of each syllable. Then, after a long pause: "That's all it were, Bill!"

"Oo-ay!" said Bill, a long time later. "So that's all it were, were it? Now what do you say, Stephen, to a thing like that?"

It could be presumed the conversation had no reference to the bomb which had just come down. You cannot say of a bomb it is only an old shard.

"Ay, Bill!" repeated Stephen. "You can believe me or not, just an old shard!"

Danny Mather was aware that if something didn't happen very quickly in the way of a drink, he would be sweeping on to the floor all the glasses, with or without liquor in them, that were standing about on the counter before him. He had tasted blood. There was no knowing where it would stop.

"A double whisky!" he called out loudly. His foot was beating an angry tattoo on the floor.

The landlord looked up. A bomb's a bomb, but when a stranger starts calling out for double whiskies as if he were asking for lemonade things are happening. He came up from below decks. He was about to utter some ironical remark when it occurred to him he ought to go easy. He was, after all, a man of a large heart, and a good publican. The poor bloke might have been given a regular jolt by the old bomb; he might have been standing only a few yards away; he could probably do with a double. He looked pretty awful, too, with his mouth trembling as if he was talking to himself, and his face was that red it looked it was on fire. He was about to turn to the shelf behind and above him, where the bottles of spirits were set out, when suddenly he realized he knew that face. It was the face of

that fellow Mather—yes, Mather the name was—that had been brought up as a kid by the old geyser opposite, Miss Letford, of The Hazels. When he had grown up he had gone to foreign parts somewhere, but he'd used to come back on a visit to Westerleigh on leave every few years. Yes, that was him, right enough, or his name was von Tirpitz. All these years the young fellow had never once come into the Barleycorn, though they passed the time of day with each other out on the road. That Miss Letford didn't hold with public-houses, it seemed. Well, well, this young fellow coming into the local—it must be the Day of Judgment, thought the landlord.

Then: Yes, he reminded himself, what have all those old ladies met for across the road at The Hazels? (For Westerleigh was a small place, and The Hazels and the Barleycorn were no distance from each other, and it was odd how much that happened in the first place formed the subject of delighted discussion in the other.) They do say they're sisters, all six of them, and they've never been under the same roof, not all of them at one time, for fifty years. The Day of Judgment! That must be it! That's why they all went over to the churchyard this afternoon, to settle where they want to fix themselves up. First the war's going to end, to-night probably . . . I only hope they'll give me till closing-time. . . . Then it'll be the Day of Judgment.

"Haig and Haig or Johnny Walker?" he asked.

"Oh, anything you like," said Danny.

I don't like the tone of voice, mused the landlord. But he doesn't look any too good, poor fellow. It would do him no harm to have a look round the churchyard himself.

"A splash?" he asked, moving the siphon forward.

"I'll take it straight," said Danny, as if he was doing someone a favour. He tossed the stuff back, and knocked the glass down on the counter. "Same again!" he requested.

"A bit close, that bomb!" said the landlord, determined to be friendly. "But it might have been worse."

"Yes," Danny snapped. He seemed to be in an awful temper about something. He knocked the next one back almost as quickly. "Same again," he ordered.

Making up for lost time, the landlord said to himself. He was a patient sort of a man. Well, that's all right. They don't drop a bomb on Westerleigh Common every day.

Danny was beginning to feel a little easier; or, at all events, the anger was less fierce.

"The old hag!" he growled inside himself. "I'd like to have had her with me that night of the Muar fighting . . . and left her to the Japs to deal with her!"

A couple of customers had drifted in from the fireworks outside. Londoners probably. They were not much impressed.

"A couple of pints of bitter, Audrey," said one.

"Make mine old and mild," said the other.

Audrey was back again now. Audrey was the barmaid. She got on with it.

"Excuse me," the landlord said. It really was quite impossible for him to resist the temptation. "Aren't you Mr. Mather, the nephew of Miss Letford, from The Hazels there?"

"Quite right," said Danny.

"I don't think we've had the pleasure of having you in here before."

"I think not." Danny's manner was not effusive. It never was at the best of times.

The landlord was floundering a little. Landlords in their own houses expect their customers to think themselves flattered when they seek to engage their customers in conversation. Particularly in wartime, when the customers are drinking whiskies, in fact double whiskies; and a third one pretty well through, and doubtless a fourth on its way.

"Same again," said Danny.

There you are, thought the landlord. What did I tell you? There wasn't anything to do about it, somehow, but to produce the stuff again. The young fellow was in a queer state. All shot to pieces, he looked.

"I was glad to see all your aunts looking so well," said the landlord. He wasn't discouraged yet. "I saw them at the churchyard this afternoon as I was passing by. Or, let me see now, isn't one your mother?"

"What did you say?" The young man's mind was obviously somewhere else.

"Isn't one of those six ladies your mother?"

"Yes."

"They've been saying in the village that those six ladies haven't been under the same roof together for fifty years. Is that true, Mr. Mather, if you don't mind me asking? It must be a bit of a record."

Then Danny turned so suddenly on the landlord, you might have thought he was going to let fly at him with either fist or tongue.

"Listen here, Mr. . . . Oh, what's your name?"

"Hardacre."

"Listen here, Mr. Hardacre. Tell me this. Do *you* believe that we were all yellow out in Malaya? I mean the army out there, and the civil servants, and the businessmen, and the Europeans generally? Do *you* believe it? Do the people in the bar here, the people out in the village, the people all round about, do *they* believe it?"

The landlord's head was swimming. What on earth was wrong with the young man? Was this the way the whisky affected him?

"I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Mather. I haven't given the matter a thought. I shouldn't think so, now I come to think of it. I

shouldn't think so at all. I take it you were out there, Mr. Mather?"

"Yes, I got back to-day."

"Fancy that now, Mr. Mather. I hope the missis is well. There's a small boy, too, isn't there? I saw you with a small boy last time you were in these parts."

"The old hag!" stormed Danny Mather. His fist opened out on the counter and slowly closed again as if it was closing in on somebody's throat.

"Well, that's strange," mused Mr. Hardacre. "He surely can't be talking about his wife like that. She seemed such a nice young woman, if I remember right. He must have had a drop or two before he came in." It was all very puzzling, and he'd had about enough of it, really. He thought the best way out of the situation was to have another quick one himself, though he had already had one or two. Landlord or no landlord, you can be forgiven for standing yourself one or two when a bomb falls a few yards from your doorstep.

Then he saw that blonde get up from the little table over in the alcove, bringing her glass with her. She, too, had been drinking whiskies, though they were only singles. She had been drinking from noon till afternoon closing-time—seemingly she had not been interested in anything to eat—and now she was at it again; at least she'd been at it again since opening-time, and she looked like going on. Honestly, if he let this couple go on having all they wanted, not only would they be making nuisances of themselves, he would be cutting in on the whisky supplies of the regular customers.

"Do you think it could be a double this time, landlord?" asked the blonde. It was a soft voice, a dreamy, fruity, sad voice.

"Are you quite sure you want it a double?" asked the landlord.

"Make it two doubles!" exclaimed Danny Mather, to his own immense surprise. He had never been in the habit of buying double whiskies for totally strange blondes, at all events if they themselves had not said a word about it.

The landlord gasped. He had never been treated like this in his own house before. There seemed only two alternatives, to give this young fellow a regular piece of his tongue . . . or not to. He found himself meekly fulfilling the order.

"Oh, but you shouldn't, really you shouldn't. I can afford to pay for my own, you know." And she meant it. And she looked at it. She was really an attractive young lady . . . well, not young exactly. She was quite likely thirty-five, and not pretending to be much less. She was a blonde. Peroxide had something to do with that, but she was still a blonde. She had blue eyes and a fresh pink complexion, hardly any rouge and lipstick to speak of—well, not much. She wore a powder-blue artificial marocain dress, decorated below the left collarbone with an elaborate diamanté R.A.F. brooch. She wore large pearl stud earrings, also edged with diamanté, that

snuggled sweetly in the lobes of her ears. There was a really nice collar of big artificial pearls round her throat. The low V of her dress was edged cosily with a wide white georgette frill. The high-heeled shoes, which were black suède semi-sandals, the black satchel of mixed suède and smooth leather, the silk stockings, were all of good quality, and not loud, either.

No, she didn't look as if she needed anyone to pay for her drinks. Also, she didn't look as if she was the sort that would let them, unless they made a good impression on her straight away. There was somehow a nice smell to her, and that wasn't just her scent. She struck you as being a thoroughly decent sort, kind and soft and motherly. She was, you might say, a little on the chubby side.

It was all those things that made Danny's heart move over towards her, in a queer sort of way, though God knows he had had enough women about him all day long—all those things, and one or two things more. To begin with, she wasn't the same sort of woman. She wasn't so bloody respectable as all those other women had been, so respectable they gave you the belly-ache, if you hadn't got one already. But more than that: this woman was miserable like himself, she was under the weather. There was the suggestion of a tear-drop in those forget-me-not eyes. She had had a drink or two, that was obvious; but it wasn't that that made her sad. She was grieving about somebody. Like himself.

"Oh, please," he begged. "It would cause me a lot of pleasure." He felt himself less dreadfully lonely all of a sudden.

The blue eyes smiled at him under their hint of tears.

"It's awfully nice of you, really it is. If you don't mind. I'll take mine back with me to the table."

"Allow me," he insisted. He took her glass and his own, and followed her to the small table in the alcove. "If you don't mind, I'll sit down here, too."

"You might as well." Her voice had suddenly gone a little flat and weary. "My friend doesn't look as if he's going to turn up to-day."

"I do hope you're not worried," said Danny.

"It's no good worrying," said the lady. She sighed, then tried to get some briskness in her voice. "We're all in it together. Worrying never did anyone any good, did it?"

"No," agreed Danny, "no. It never got anyone anywhere." He sighed, too. It suddenly struck both of them as rather funny that they should sit facing each other like that, perfect strangers as they were, sighing lugubriously at each other. They smiled simultaneously, and simultaneously raised their glasses.

"Cheers!" said Danny.

"Happy days!" said the lady.

"Cigarette?" asked Danny, and brought out a packet. It was empty. "I suppose they keep them here," he observed, and rose.

"Don't get up!" she said. "Have one of these!" She opened

her smart bag and brought out a cigarette-case. This, too, was a pretty expensive affair. It had the R.A.F. insignia in jewels in one corner.

"He's crazy about me," she said, and smiled. It was a charming smile, her teeth were very good.

"I'm not at all surprised," Danny told her. "Who wouldn't be?"

"Now, now!" she reproved him. She tapped the back of his hand with the tip of her middle finger. "I'm crazy about him, too!" Her whole heart was in her voice. They were obviously very fond of each other, those two, and very happy together.

"I hope he's all right," said Danny.

A spasm of pain shot across her face.

"Yes," she said. "The last I heard from him was only yesterday. He was all right. He said we should meet here twelve-thirty to-day. He's not turned up yet. He's in the R.A.F. You know how it is."

"I shouldn't worry," urged Danny. "Honestly I shouldn't. Something turns up at the last moment, and there you are."

"He's an awful dear," she exclaimed in a sudden burst of confidence. "And *terribly* good-looking! Would you like to see his photograph?" She had already unsnapped her handbag, and was poking around. "Here it is!" She brought out a little wallet, with a photograph let in behind an oval shield of celluloid, and reached it forward. "There he is! Don't you think he's beautiful?"

She herself looked extraordinarily beautiful at that moment, more like a mother, gazing at an image of her child, than a woman gazing at the image of her lover. He seemed a pleasant young man, probably at least ten years her junior; one of those young men who, particularly in times of war, need their women to have a good deal of the mother in them. The hair curled boyishly above his brow. He had a bow-shaped, rather petulant mouth. There was a good deal of resolution, however, in the chin, which helped to explain that ribbon on the tunic of the uniform.

"That's the D.F.C.," the woman said proudly. "*Isn't* he sweet!" She became aware after a lapse of some seconds that her new friend was not looking at the photograph; he was not with her. She looked up. He seemed hardly the same young man, his face was so racked with pain. "Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said. "I do hope I've not said anything to upset you!" She was not a subtle woman, but she was sensitive, quick in sympathy.

"I suddenly remembered," he said. "I was going to take out the photograph of my wife and son to show you. Then I remembered. I've not got them. They're in my attaché-case."

"Oh, dear, I do hope you've not lost it. Where did you leave it? In the train? I'm sure if you telephoned at once——"

"No. I know where it is. It's in my aunt's house opposite, The Hazels. You can see it through the window if you turn round."

She turned. The window was half open, pushed out on a slotted

bar. "What a nice house!" she said. "Well, that's all right. Why are you looking so worried?"

"I don't like being without it. It's been with me . . . ever since I found it waiting for me in Singapore. I oughtn't to forget it like this. I don't like it. I'm losing my grip."

"Don't be a silly boy," she reproved him. "You can pick it up as soon as you leave this place. You might even go over for it. I'll look after your drink."

"No," he said. "I'm never going back into that house again, at least not while . . . You see, I've had a rather violent quarrel with someone in there. I'd rather not talk about it."

"Of course, dear." She was an affectionate creature. She had a feeling he rather would like to talk about it. He'd like to get it off his chest. He seemed all screwed up together, like a ball of newspaper. "Don't talk about it," she said. "Don't, not till you feel like it."

"I feel quite lost without that case," he said. "Funny, isn't it? Do you know what we've been through together, that bag and I?"

"I'll tell you what," she said. "I'll go over and get it for you. How would you like that? You don't need to worry," she said playfully. "I won't run off with it. I'll leave my bag behind, see?"

He smiled. It was impossible to resist smiling, though the smile was wistful enough. The thought of this chubby, peroxided, silk-stockinged blonde going over from the Barleycorn to The Hazels, as an emissary to those six Letford women from their nephew, Danny Mather, had its humour.

"What are you smiling at?" she said. "I hope I haven't said anything to offend you, have I?"

"Oh, good heavens, no!" he assured her. "No! I think you'd think it awfully funny, too, if I told you, Miss . . . er . . . isn't it silly? We don't know each other's names."

"I'm Miss Bowman," she said. "But Stella's my name. *Do* call me Stella."

"Of course I will . . . Stella. Danny Mather's my name . . . Danny."

"Isn't that funny," she said. The pain was on her mouth again. "His name's Lenny. Short for Leonard, of course." She looked at the photograph of the young airman once more, then was about to replace it in her bag.

"Please!" he said. "I didn't see it properly." He held out his hand. "Thank you. A good chap," he observed. "What a good-looker!"

"Yes," she agreed, "isn't he?" She took the photograph back and contemplated it for several seconds. Then she replaced it abruptly in her bag. Once more she said nothing for a time. She stared straight before her. Fear was written upon her eyes like

writing on a slate. Then she moved her head sharply towards Danny.

"Tell me why it's funny, Danny," she said. It wasn't only that she was switching her mind away from the subject of her young man. She was genuinely, you might even say affectionately, interested in the other young man, here in the Barleycorn, drinking whisky with her. She was an expansive, warm-hearted creature. It made you feel good to be with her. "That is if I'm not poking my nose in," she added.

"Not at all," he assured her. "I meant it. It's funny. You'll laugh."

"Is it because your people are terribly respectable, and you and me have just met, you know, rather casual, in a pub?"

"Well, Stella, that's it. You've said it all in a way."

She paused.

"Oh, yes, I see it's funny right enough." She was just a little dubious. She was just a bit hurt, too.

"My dear," he said. "There's respectable and respectable. Let me tell you. There are six sisters in that house, of whom one is my mother and the other five are my aunts. Of the five aunts four are old maids. There are various other old maids around the place, and four Pekinese. Do you know why those six sisters have come together from the furthest ends of the country? And in war-time? And not one is under sixty? And the oldest is over eighty? Shall I tell you?"

He told her. It was extraordinary with what ease he found himself talking to this completely strange woman: He knew there was a lot of alcohol flowing in his veins, and a lot flowing in hers, for that matter. But it wasn't the alcohol that was talking. It really was comfortable being with her, and bringing it all out. Like with Martha, earlier in the day, It was strange, but there it was, these two women, one of whom he had never thought of as anything but a tattered kitchen-maid, and the other one a total stranger.

He told her the story of the six Letford women, and their mother, and their father, as much as he knew of it. And then he told her the sequel to it all, the things that had happened that day. She did not smile, as he told it, nor did he. She did not smile when he came to an end. She sighed once or twice, and said nothing.

"You don't think it very funny," he said. "Do you? I don't suppose it is."

"No," she said quietly. "It isn't funny. It's sad. But I can quite see why it wouldn't do for me to go over there for your bag."

"If you really *would* go," said Danny, "it would be decent of you."

"No, of course not. Don't be silly. Your mother will bring it to the station, won't she?"

"Of course she will. She's bound to. If she doesn't, I'd just go back for it, that's all."

"So please don't try and worry about it any more, will you?"

"Thanks, Stella. You're a brick! Same again?"

"No, dear. A single will do, thank you."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, Danny. I want to know what day it is."

Danny went up to the counter and came back with the drinks.

"I think you're rather a naughty boy," she said.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "It takes an awful lot to lay me out. You'd be surprised. We learn how to take it, out there."

"I didn't mean that," she said. "Forget about it."

"What was it, Stella dear?"

"I mean your aunt," she told him.

"Which one?" He knew very well which one.

"You know which one," she said. "The eldest one."

"What do you want to say?"

"You shouldn't hate her so much. You should be sorry for her."

"It's a funny thing, Stella."

"What's funny?"

"If anybody else said that . . . even my own mother . . . As a matter of fact somebody did say that today. Or at least implied it. That's exactly what Aunt Lavinia was after during that pow-wow in the garden."

"Well?"

"If anybody else said that . . . well, I wouldn't consider it cheek exactly. It would leave me stone-cold."

"There you are. I knew I shouldn't say it."

"You're a pal, Stella. That's all I can say."

She looked up rather wearily, and smiled.

"You're all right, too."

"I do wish you didn't look so miserable," he burst out. "You know what it is with the R.A.F. boys. They're all set for a spot of eave when an order comes from somewhere: Be off in five minutes! He's all right, Stella. He'll turn up."

"Yes, he'll turn up. Perhaps he'll turn up this very evening——"

"That's what I say."

"—though it's getting a bit late. Then we'll have another date, and he may turn up on the nail next time. If he can, he will. I know that. Then we'll have another date, and he'll turn up again. And another. Then the day will come when he won't turn up. Never, never, never!" She covered her eyes with her hands.

"Please," he begged. He stretched his hands out across the table, and took both her hands. "You mustn't talk like that. You've got to believe. I'm in pretty much of the same fix," he said. "It could hardly be more hopeless. Months have gone by, months.

It seems like years. But I've got to go on believing or I'll pass out."

"Is it both of them?" she asked. Her voice was very gentle. "The wife and the boy? Out there is it, in Malaya?"

He nodded his head.

"Will you tell me about them?" she asked. "How it was?"

He knew how dreadfully she wanted not to think of that day, whether it was a week ahead, a month ahead, whenever it might be, when her young lover would not turn up. He knew also she was a kind and good woman, despite the tartishness of the peroxide and the jewellery. There was a good deal of his story left untold. He knew—he had found out earlier that day—that to tell his tale somehow assuaged the smart.

"We'll have something more to drink," he said. "Kill that one!" He got up with the two empty glasses and came back with the two full ones.

"This is how it was," he said.

CHAPTER TEN

I

He told her about Helen and Edward, the thing that had happened on the road to Seremban, the tale of his arrival in Singapore, the tale of the search in Singapore, the tale of the job of work that had taken him back up-country again.

He took with him the attaché-case that he had found at Raffles. He had packed it so as to have a supply of the essentials when he got to Singapore, and there they were. They included all he had, for the time being, of Helen and Edward, the wallet containing their photographs. He added a knife, a pocket compass, and some maps of the areas he hoped to operate in, also an automatic, and a few loose cartridges, and one day's rations. Then he slipped a strap through the handle of the attaché-case, so that he could carry it across his shoulder. In addition to his own money, he had a decent wad of notes supplied by His Nibs, for he might have to dispense a good deal of largess.

He made no attempt to look like a native. He was too big to be taken for a Malay, and his Chinese wasn't up to much. He would have to rely on other things than a disguise to get him through the Japanese lines and back again, if he was going to get back. He wore

a broad-brimmed hat, which he threw away the first day, a khaki tunic, a pair of flannels, socks and rubber-soled shoes. Among the small things in his pocket he had a spare ignition key for the Austin. There was something symbolic about it. He knew he wasn't going to find the car in such a condition that he could start it by slipping in the key, but he couldn't have thrown it away even if it weighed a pound or two.

The front ahead of him wasn't much of a front, as it never had been, and never was to be. There had been considerable excitement on the western reaches of the Muar River area, some seventy miles north and west of Singapore, but after several days of wild fighting, which ran the gamut between big guns and tanks to jungle-sniping, the Empire troops had fallen back. The area of activity was not roughly the trans-peninsula road which led from Batu Pahat on the west, across the main north-to-south railway at Kluang to Endau and Mersing on the east coat. On the twenty-first of January the British had fallen back from the Endau outpost. The Japanese had already sent small landing-parties down the coast southward from Batu Pahat to infiltrate through the mangrove swamps and paddy fields and come upon the British defences from the rear. The battle was not very far away from Singapore now. The yellow fog was coming up close.

The first part of Danny's journey presented no difficulty. He could have jumped on to a bicycle and covered most of the distance that way, but he reckoned on being able to pick one up almost anywhere, as soon as he wanted it, whatever price they asked for it. So, armed with a pass which wasn't even looked at, he boarded an army lorry on the inland side of the Causeway, and had a four hours' ride which wasn't devoid of incident, what with the stream of army and refugee traffic, the bomb-craters, and the frequent strafing from the Japanese planes overhead, which were in particularly good form that morning.

Then, at the point where a side-road went off to a small place called Rengam, he got down. They had reached the principal game reserve of his Highness the Sultan of Johore, and it was there that Danny proposed to do his own private job of infiltration. He played with the idea that the Japanese would tend to avoid the reserve as far as they could, out of their inborn respect for anything pertaining to royalty ; if they could flank it they would. A moment's reflection made him realize that was nonsense. The reserve was a tract of jungle like any other, a thing you tackled or by-passed. He would tackle it. The important thing was that he knew the reserve well, having helped his Highness's rangers in a job of surveying there some two or three years earlier. The reserve was some ten miles across as the crow flies, but he would be walking, not flying, and along very tortuous paths. He therefore reckoned it would take him a half-day and more to get through to the other side. He would hit the main

Batu Pahat-Mersing road, he hoped, somewhere near a path hat continued northward through a stretch of secondary jungle facing the reserve. The map showed a small *kampong* some three miles out in the waste. There was no reason to imagine the Japanese would be interested in it, and there he would find shelter for the night.

At least he hoped to. A good deal depended on the reception the natives gave him when he got there, and not only as far as his own fortunes were concerned. If they treated him well, there was no reason to imagine they would treat him ill elsewhere on his wanderings. It was also possible to believe that the raj which had been overthrown might, however adapted or transformed, be set up again in these territories. He remembered with impatience the belly-aching of the American correspondent, Stebson, two nights ago, at Raffles. "They don't care a damn, the Malays, whether you English are there or not there, whether you attempt to come back or keep out for ever. What the hell have you done for them? What have you given them?" That was his line of talk.

Well, he, Danny, had given them twelve years of his life so far, and he might be giving the rest of his life, too, before he was many weeks older, and he'd helped to build a few roads and bridges and railway-lines, and to drain a few swamps, and put up a few schools and hospitals. For the time being his wife and child, too, were in the debit balance. He felt he'd done enough to claim a night's lodging in the *kampong* in the *lalang*. The American johnny had a lecture-platform to build up, he supposed. Probably he had a wife and kid, too, way back in Illinois. The American johnny gave him a sour taste at the back of his tongue.

From the *kampong* he would next day make west by north in the direction of the road junction of Yong Peng, avoiding the place itself, at least by day; thence he would continue across to the lower ground, where the network of secondary roads ramified among the large rubber estates in that region. Before long he would be hitting the Muar waters, where he imagined he would have to be pretty careful. He had been told that lost British units might still be holding out in those parts, so the Japanese round there would be extra watchful. The job would be simpler from then on. The country was not thickly held by the enemy, their success had been due not to their numbers but to their gross superiority in aircraft and tanks. The Japanese held the roads and railways. It was enough, of course. But if he avoided them, excepting when he arranged to devote to them his professional attention, he could hope to move about fairly freely and get where he wanted to, so long as he kept his head.

"Well, thanks a lot, corporal," Danny called out to the driver of the lorry at the fork of the road to Rengam.

"Good-bye, chum," the driver called back. "Look after yourself." He drove off.

Straight ahead the road gleamed like a rod of metal cooled in the hangar of a factory. On Danny's right hand a great wave of forest arched over him as if at any moment it might break in a slithering collapse of trunks and branches, leaves and fronds, flowers, ferns. But it persisted. No wind stirred the least leaf. He found a path not many yards away, and stepped over into it, between two projecting spikes of elk's-horn fern. At once the path engulfed his feet like a trough of dark water. There was no more road, no more corporal, no more lorry, nothing left of all that order from which those things derived. Then yards had carried him away a distance both in time and space for which there were no gauges. This sweat and heat were aboriginal, clammy with primal germination.

It was hard going, over a path now spongy with bog, now hard and slippery as steel plates over an outcropping of polished granite. Sometimes the massive roots of trees were like a complex of pipes feeding the boilers of some gigantic machinery. Often the track wound back upon itself, or would seem to stop dead, where some huge tree that had torn itself out from the spongy earth presented its roots, writhing and interlaced and grinning, like a school of snakes. Then, beyond the sharp-pronged palisade, somehow you picked up the track again, and continued over hollow and hummock, along the beds of old water-courses, till you came out upon some clearing, where high overhead the opaque greenness lashed together by a fabulous multiplicity of creepers, soared and swung down again in a perfect vault. Here sound, like light, was secondary, all was echo and reflection. Till suddenly a leaf stirred and whispered, a lost sunray thrust through the tangle. And in that moment once more the spine tingled to the war's vibration. An aeroplane drummed high overhead, a mile above the plaited density of branches. There was a sharp crack, which might have been twigs cracking under feet somewhere at hand, or a far quick bark of machine-gun fire.

The war was in the air you breathed again. What was that sound? Who swung that curtain of hanging moss? Were those calls the real or the simulated voices of bird and beast, the wheezy puffing of hornbills, the stutter of monkeys, tree-frogs booming like gongs?

The war thinned, the faint sulphurous smell of it was extinguished in the nostrils, as doggedly you thrust your way forward in a continuity of dank discomfort and prostrating hard work, till at length the movements became automatic, the squelch and trudge of feet, the mopping of the brow with the soaked handkerchief, the slapping down of biting insects on exposed surfaces.

At last he became aware of a dimming of the leafy gloom ahead of him, a dim dazzle of sunrays, and his foot was on hard macadam again as suddenly as he had left it. He was on the main road that runs east to west across the peninsula. He was about to take his bearings from certain features he was familiar with when the sound

of feet approaching from round a bend in the roadway struck his ear.

Shocked out of his itchy torpor, he withdrew into the shelter of a giant clump of ferns, and thence looked through and saw a platoon of Japanese infantrymen shuffling forward from the east. For units of a triumphant army they did not look particularly exalted; but having the substance they perhaps did not need the outer show. They were runty creatures, sallow, bespectacled, hollow-chested, their camouflaged helmets and their body netting slung behind them over their packs and water-bottles. Not even their flags, with which they were liberally equipped, gave them any sort of festive air. They sweated, and they smelled, and they were dangerous. An armoured car went hurtling by westward toward Batu Pahat.

"Better take things easy," determined Danny. He withdrew a little distance into the forest, and sat down on a fallen log which seemed clear of crawlers. "It would do no harm," he decided, "to remove a few of these things." He meant the leeches which were gathered about his ankles, like a sort of bulby olive-green lichen, faintly flushed with his blood as they swelled into cigar-shaped sacks. Then a thought occurred to him. "God Almighty!" he exclaimed. "Do you realize it, boy? You've gone slap through the front line like an acrobat through a paper hoop. You had no idea you were so clever, eh?" He was very pleased with himself, limp though he was, his blood half-drained out of him. It continued to be a satisfying thought to him for many weeks, when the world seemed gloomy enough in most directions; till the day he learned in Bombay that a fellow named Whittaker, realizing in Singapore that he had left his collection of postage stamps in a cupboard in his house at Malacca, got on to a bicycle, pedalled to Malacca, picked up his collection of postage stamps, and pedalled back to Singapore again.

Then as he sat there, applying lighted matches to the leeches to make them give up their hold, and dropping them into an oozy puddle beside the log, he perceived that in the few minutes since he had settled there the ground at his feet had become a battlefield. Obliquely across the track from left to right, an army of black ants paraded in strict procession, to disappear under a hanging mop of creeper. From right to left marched an army of red *keringa* ants, likewise to disappear in the green brake opposite. Each army moved in three columns, two columns of males on the outside, in between a column of females with their young. The two armies did not meet. The main forces pursued their separate destinies. But the creatures being implacable enemies, a detachment of several dozens had broken off from each army and were now joined in battle. The dead were already piling up on the battlefield, and the black ants, as always, were having the worst of it. As always, but not in vain, for steadily, imperturbably, the army for which they sacrificed themselves marched on in safety. Only a few minutes ago, and these armies had not been there. Only a few weeks ago, mused Danny, and the

human armies had not been there, deployed across the steamy length of the Malayan peninsula. A dim, odd business, he told himself. Fighting ants, fighting humans. Is there any other case throughout nature where members of the same species wage war against each other? He took out a match, lit it, and placed it in the path of the marching red columns. At once a dozen males from the outer columns threw themselves upon the conflagration and extinguished it with their bodies, while the females marched scatheless on with their young.

Do you think you've got anything on me, chaps? the tormented fellow murmured. Do you think I wouldn't have put out that burning car with my bare fists if I'd been as lucky as you, and had been on hand when the thing went up?

"Hello!" he shouted suddenly. It was as if someone had called out his name. But it was not a human voice. From a hanging valance of creeper close by his head a shrill call assailed his ear. At once, from the depths a few feet away, a shrill call responded. Then the whole forest was wheezy with whistling as the cicadas and tree-beetles proclaimed day's end. Some night-fowl, awakened too soon to its night's job of foraging, croaked its remonstrance. On all the adjacent trees the night-fowl croaked and fluttered. Undisturbed by that cacophony of sleepy day-bird, a Straits robin perhaps, insisted on a final roulade. In a remote eyrie along the higher trees a family of monkeys snarled and gibbered.

"It'll be so dark in here in five minutes," murmured Danny, "I won't be able to see my hand in front of my face. I'm getting out of this." He made his way to the main road again, and looked out cautiously. It was all right, there was no one in sight. He imagined the Japanese would not move at night more than they had to. It was easy in this type of country to run into an ambush. He turned to the left and strode along silently. Day collapsed about his head like a hill of soft snow. In the night-purged heavens, the stars breathed and went out and went on again, like fire-flies. He was not out in his calculations. Some ten minutes' walk away, on the opposite side of the road, there the path was that he had relied on. He stood for a moment, looking right and left, then crossed the road into the *lalang*.

It was an eerie region, filmy with ten-foot-high grasses, with eldritch clumps of thorn darkening against a rising moon. The insects had not wholly suppressed their chattering, but it was in a lower key now, and so continuous that it wove in and out of the stillness like the woof of a fabric. Twice an owl blundered across his path, once a workman-bird began to hammer a bough with his beak, till the human footfall startled it, and the hammer hung suspended in mid-air.

He was beginning to worry lest he had wandered on to the wrong path, when he came down into a stretch of untilled paddy-field, scruffy with the spreading *lalang* grass. He knew he could not

be far off. Ten minutes later he was ploughing his way through the fallen shards of a coconut grove. Suddenly the dogs started barking. They barked and barked, as if even their leather throats must be torn to shreds; then they stopped as suddenly as they had begun. The visitor was evidently no tiger, but what sort of creature was he? They held their tongues and listened and waited. Then he traversed a thin fringe of betel-nut palms and at last found himself in an alley slushy with buffalo-droppings, between two bamboo-fenced houses raised on palm-tree posts. He strode forward, and, standing in the centre of the moon-drenched *kampong*, looked round. Not a soul was to be seen, not a light flickered in any of the houses, not even a dog whimpered. Only the insects whined and twanged, and tne bats scurried, twittering.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Danny murmured. "They're scared, I suppose. What about me?" He walked over to the house nearest him. A dog lying in the blackness under the flooring growled, yelped, relapsed into silence. "Hello, you inside there!" Danny called out. There was no reply. He took into his hands the rickety ladder that led up into the house and shook it. "Anyone there?" No one uttered a sound, either in that house or in any of its neighbours. Then a thought lit up his brain. "Be not afraid!" he cried. "It is I, *Sahaya tuan Mather, deri Kuala Lumpur*!" He had not more than a second or two to wait. He heard a sound as of pent breath released, and of bodies relaxing out of their stiffness, and of flooring creaking as bodies moved. It seemed the sounds came not only from the house where he stood, but from each house in the *kampong*, so that the place, which had seemed still as a graveyard, became a habitation of humans again. He heard the sound of a match being struck in the house above him and a glass lampshade being pulled out of its socket. The wick glimmered and flared. Then a figure came towards him out of the further depths, the lamp swinging as it moved.

"What is the news?" a man asked, leaning forward over the head of the ladder. "I trust the *tuan* will forgive this unmannerliness. Will the *tuan* come up and take food with us?"

"The news is good," Danny replied, mounting the ladder. "The unmannerliness is mine, to disturb you in this fashion." A hand reached forward to help him up on to the platform.

"Let me take this burden from the *tuan's* shoulder. So. And will not the *tuan* seat himself one moment and remove his shoes?"

Danny did as he was bid. With great deliberation the man put the lamp down, as far away along the platform as he could. Already the great horned insects were blundering and clinking in swarms against the smoky glass shade. Beyond the bamboo screen that shut in the living-quarters of the house there was a sound of whispering and scurrying. The women were bestowing themselves well out of the way.

"I would not wish to disturb you, nor your household," declared Danny. "If there were a cup of coconut to drink, for I am thirsty, and a mat on which I might stretch my limbs——"

"I pray you, *tuan*, will you enter?" Not a rajah could have ushered his guest into his palace with more courtliness. Danny stepped across the doorway in the bamboo screen wall. The sole light in the inner room came from the platform outside through the laths of the screening. On a sort of raised dais beyond, two or three male children were still sleeping. One small boy was already busy with a petrol can of water and a tin basin. Two youths were busy with gourds and brass platters. Danny sat down, as his host bade him, and a heap of mangosteens, rambutans and lansats were set before him, a platter of rice-cakes, and a great helping of coconut milk poured into a half-shell, polished for drinking.

"I drink," said Danny, "to the day after to-morrow."

"In the hand of the Prophet," his host murmured.

So Danny ate and drank and was refreshed; and the light was put out, and they talked together, he and his host, for a time, of the affliction that had come upon the country. Overhead in the roof-beams a *chichak* lizard clicked lightly like a tongue against the palate. It was a friendly sound. Below a buffalo champed and rubbed his flanks. At length his host spread out a mat for him to lie on, on the rattan-tied bamboo flooring, and he himself placed under his head for a pillow his attaché-case muffled in his tunic.

"Good night," they said to each other, and "Good night," as if they were friends of long standing, who hoped to be together again when the present mischances were at an end. And his host turned on his side and was asleep at once, but Danny lay there, thinking.

"He was wrong, that American fellow," he mused. "These people are our friends. I wonder if I'll be there when it's all put right again? The Japs won't have a good opinion of me. But the bugs in my guts loathe me. Yet what'll I care for Japs or bugs if I find Helen and Edward, and can be with them for a time?"

He slept well, and rose at dawn, at the instant summons of birds and cicadas. But he did not go forth again on his quest without taking his host aside and asking him if by chance, though the chance was slim, he had heard of an English *mem*, and her small child with yellow hair, that were lost in the Seremban region and were presumed wandering somewhere towards the coast. The man, alas, had heard nothing, but that was to be expected, for this, after all, was a good many miles away from those parts, many rivers flowed between and there was much swamp and scrub and jungle.

So Danny set forth towards Seremban, his host travelling with him, and one or two other dwellers in the *kampong*, to see that he should not err at a tangle of paths some three hours' journey across the *lalang*.

II

There were one or two important power stations on the road to Seremban to which Danny had been asked to give his especial attention. It was not known whether they had been adequately put out of action, and it was Danny's job to make sure. Yes, the job had been better done than up north. To a certain part of himself tin mines and power stations did not exist for Danny. Neither did the Japanese Army nor the British Army, neither war nor peace. Only Helen and Edward existed, only the gnawing cancer of his suspense. None the less, he dealt with these establishments on the road to Seremban, though they held him up several days. It was work that involved danger and required skill, but he was not conscious of either. He did the job, then he moved on, usually by bicycle—he had had no difficulty in acquiring a bicycle—once or twice for several sticky miles by bullock-cart, his tied-on bicycle visible to the naked eye. himself invisible under a heap of palm-trunk shards.

Seremban was the biggest place he had come to since leaving Singapore, and there he had to move with great care, all the more since there was a stretch of tin-mining country along the roadway where he intended to begin his search, and the Japanese were beginning to get fractious about the mysterious acts of sabotage that kept on occurring up and down the place.

It was half an hour before dawn when Danny found himself at the clearing in front of Wung Loo's store, where the tale of the disappearance of Helen and Edward began. Whether or not Wung Loo himself was still extant, Danny could not decide, for the store was closely shuttered; it had an abandoned air. For a moment Danny entertained the idea of trying to find out whether Wung Loo, or anyone at all, was still inside there; then he dismissed it as dangerous. You could not stand about trying to knock someone up on a main road; besides, you never knew who it might be. He determined instead to make off down the road to the wreck of his burned and broken car.

It was not that he had for one moment permitted himself to hope that Ali's story, as repeated by his uncle, was false, or even inaccurate. It was not that the spectacle of the car would be anything but lugubrious in the last degree. He only knew that the logic of his undertaking demanded from him that he should find the thing and proceed from that point wherever he must go. And he had no doubt at all he would come across the car. A forlorn chunk of scrap amongst the mountains of scrap that littered the roads of Malaya, who would want to cart it off, or do anything more with it than to prod it out of the way into the ditch?

And the bones of that other woman would still be there, the ants would not have had time to pick them clean yet. The heaps of dead lay sprawled across the peninsula. Who would go out of his way to

move a handful of bones from a wrecked car in a jungle roadway?

It was not many minutes after the sun rose that he came across it, lying on its side in the ditch. It was buckled, broken, shapeless, despoiled of every inch of fitting that might have survived the burning and still be worth a penny. There was no single feature extant that identified it—except those bones—but there it was, it was nothing else than his old Austin, nothing else in all the world.

Those bones. There they lay, up against the uptilted skeleton of the front seat and cluttered below it. They were a stranger's bones. He knew that, in that moment at least, with the mystic certainty with which the mystics know Truth. Those bones had nothing more to do with him, Danny Mather, than shells or pebbles. Only the car pertained to him, or had once pertained to him—the old Austin he had picked up on his last leave in England, and brought overseas. And Helen used to be particularly fussy about the windscreen, for some reason she felt the *syce* never really got his back into it. And not so long ago they had for the first time taken young Edward to school in it up on Fraser's Hill. And it had taken you to a job of work here and there, and a spot of golf and cricket now and again, and a cocktail with the Copleys and dinner with the Wickses and an occasional movie . . . as much of a routine, you might have thought, as day and night, rain and sunshine. Then one night a bugle had sounded in a barrack-square in Kuala Lumpur. The war had come to Malaya. "I think," said Helen, "I'll go up for the kid to-morrow, if you don't think I'm panicky, or anything" . . . in the old Austin, that same Austin, lying in the ditch there, a hundredweight or two of scrap metal.

Then, as he stood there brooding over it, he heard from away up the road the noise of an advancing vehicle; it sounded like a military lorry. He got down into the ditch behind the car. He was, after all, a hunted thing, and there was no point in adding his bones to those others. The lorry passed by. He rose to his feet again, a wry smile on his face. Good old Austin! It contrived to be of some use to him, even now, even now. . . .

"Well, now I can begin," he told himself. "What happened?" It was somehow less intolerable to reconstruct it, now and here, than it had been, night after night, in the long, sleepless watches. How had the car ended up, on its back or its side, before it was shoved out of the way? There's no knowing now. The windows had certainly been down, and the sunshine roof pulled back. Perhaps the shock flung the whole door open. Anyhow they got out, Helen and Edward. She would have made an effort to do something for the other woman, but she must have seen that was hopeless. Probably the other woman was knocked out at once.

There they were then, out of the car, dazed, terrified, on the roadway here. The country on the left side is rubber. No, they did

not go that way. He expunged a recurring nightmare from his mind. A Japanese scouting party, carrying a woman and a small boy off with them, prodding them with their bayonets, grinning like mad, their teeth showing like a box of upset dominoes.

It is not that way they went. On the opposite side it is jungle, deep, dark, the aeroplanes overhead cannot see you. You run across the road, then, the child held in your hand, screaming. Or perhaps not screaming; quiet, blank, pale as water.

Danny crossed the road. The jungle wall reared above him, tied solid with creepers, sharp with thorns. The traffic would be flowing southward in a turbid stream. She would be carried down with it, making all the time for this side of the road. As soon as she saw a path she would make for it. Doesn't a path enter the jungle there, beyond the bamboo clump? Yes, here, here. This is the way they went, he told himself. So he went, too, and passed out of full dawn into twilight again. A dim wild world. The map called it the Galah Forest Reserve.

He continued along the jungle track, stamped out of the rankness across many centuries by the hooves of herds of elephants, following now, he told himself, in the track of frailer passengers. The grasshoppers and the tree-beetles let loose their shrill music again. Somewhere just above his head a parakeet squawked. A monkey protested, then another, then another far off, five hundred trees away. The whole forest was a squabble of monkeys. An hour passed, and more; the path wound in and out, over quagmires, over the roots of trees and hills. It had turned back upon itself several times, but the general direction was easterly. If this were a track that shortly swung round northward, it must lead to the *kampong* of Gidong. That was the place where the youth, Ali, lived, where he had come from that day, when the thing happened. The weeks had gone by now. Ali would be home again. Ali must have news. It was impossible to believe Ali was not home again, and with news.

The track led down to a salt-lick in the clearing, whence several tracks radiated, the clearest of them leading northward. His pulses quickened. I am on my way to some definite discovery, he told himself. They were found some distance back along the path I have been following. Perhaps it was some old man of the *kampong* poking around for roots and yams; perhaps the bombing that day scared them and the villagers drifted out into the wild. Then suddenly here is this white girl stumbling forward with blood on her face, and the silent child clasping her hand. One or the other of them, the woman or the child, might have mentioned the name: Mather. It's even possible that somebody might have recognized them from Ali's account of his visits to Kuala Lumpur. So they were taken to the *kampong* and given shelter there, and their wounds treated. They can't have got away without a scratch. Perhaps . . . he stopped, and bit his lip hard . . . perhaps they are still there . . . if Helen was knocked about pretty seriously. After all, it's

not so very long ago, if you come to think of it. God knows, it feels like twenty years, and it's not so many days. Try and think of it, Danny—perhaps they are still there.

Oh, hell, Danny, look where you're going! He had wandered off the path into a tangle of *lianci* thorns. God damn these things! he swore, and tore himself free. A hot coal assailed the back of his neck. It was the sting of a *peningat* wasp. Down the forest a hornbill laughed moonily. He got back on to the track again. He consulted his pocket compass. Yes, the track was maintaining its general northward direction.

At last the jungle thinned out into a more open region, broken up by the muffled ridges of one-time paddy fields, all overgrown now by a coarse thick blanket of elephant-grass. Beyond, a wood of coconut palms made its untidy fretwork upon the sky. Beyond that lay the *kampong*.

Beyond that (he had now quite convinced himself) there was news of Helen. It could not be otherwise. He was approaching news of Helen . . . even Helen herself. His steps quivered. His heart pounded. And then, suddenly, but quite unmistakably, the smell of burned wood came out to his nostrils. He looked round.

"There's been a fire somewhere," he murmured, "somewhere in this high grass." Here, on the outer side of the coconut plantation, he could see no sign of it. "A fire?" he asked himself. "But there's been quite a lot of rain lately. That's very odd," he told himself. He was in the coconut grove now. The smell was sharp in his nostrils. His heart and his feet quickened again. He was through the grove now, he was on the edge of the *kampong*.

But there was no *kampong*. Every house in it had been reduced to ashes. There was no living soul there, except for a few dogs scrabbling about, and the bedraggled nightjars flirting and fluttering in the dust.

Danny looked up at the sky, his eyes smarting as if black smoke had flooded them.

"You up there," his lips went. "Why don't you play fair part of the time? Aren't you tired of your loaded dice?"

"Perhaps it's a fire, that's all; just an accident," he came back upon himself.

But it was no good. He knew it was no accident. If it were an accident, the folk would be around trying to put things to rights. What had happened was clear enough. The Japanese had found it necessary for some reason to make an example of this place and its people. For what reason?

The reason was to hand. It all fitted with a hideous neatness. They had sheltered in Gidong a young woman and her small son, and tended their wounds. The word had gone forth that every Englishman in hiding, man, woman and child, must be handed over. This had not been done in Gidong. The mother and child had been passed on to some other *kampong*, westward, perhaps, nearer the

sea. The Japanese had found out about this, possibly from some informer, itching for the reward. So they had made an example of Gidong.

He threw himself down on the ground, and hid his face from the sun. For a long time he lay there, while the insects crawled over his neck and his outflung hands. He was not aware of anger, not, even of grief. He was empty and forlorn, all the virtue out of him as if he were nothing but a skull that a ferret or weasel had sucked dry.

At last he rose. He had an odd sort of feeling that someone was close by, and disapproved mightily of this boyish prostration. It was neither his wife, nor his child. They had never seemed further from him since they had left him that day in Kuala Lumpur to go and join Copley's convoy of cars. Who was it then? But, of course. It was His Nibs. His Nibs considered it wasn't at all a good show. His Nibs took the liberty of reminding him he was still, to put it bluntly, on a job of work and drawing a salary. Hadn't you better get to hell out of this? was the view of His Nibs, expressed in unusually harsh terms.

He rose, and set his face towards his next job.

III

His next job was the destruction of the processing gear of a rubber factory. He established contact with the Chinese overseer the Japanese had kicked out and neglected to exterminate, and between them they had a good time, which included the stabbing in the neck of the Japanese gentleman who had taken over.

Notably refreshed, Danny returned to his own matter again, and an episode occurred which made it impossible for him to feel that his reconstruction of events was not sober probability. He was now assuming, on the basis of what had happened to Gidong, that Helen and Edward had been passed on towards the sea, presumably in the direction of the creeks north-westward from Port Dickson. He recalled that His Nibs had made that same suggestion, more or less casually, it is true, but the casual suggestions of His Nibs had always carried great weight with him, now perhaps more than ever before.

He consulted his map. It was on the cards, if the reading of the Gidong affair was correct, that they had been conveyed to a *kampong* called Kunta in the southern reaches of this same tract of jungle off the Seremban road. To Kunta, therefore, he found his way, without difficulty, and there, on the outskirts of the *kampong*, he came upon a man building up one of those grass shelters used by night watchers on the edges of paddy fields, when the ripening crop is to be protected from the ravages of wild pigs.

The usual greeting followed. How was the news? The news

was good. But that seemed an exaggeration. What was the man staring around for so nervously? Had there been a tiger round lately? Or perhaps it was the Japs? Had the Japs installed themselves for some mad reason in this *kampong* in the heart of the jungle? What on earth for? A durian or two and a sack of rice?

"There is a question I would ask you," said Danny. "But why does my friend stare round thus? Is it that his lordship has been prowling in these parts?"

"His lordship has not been seen." It was not the tiger that disturbed the fellow. "What question would the *tuan* ask? Look, my hands are busy making my home of grass." He turned, and went on with his work. It is seldom the Malay villager is so discourteous.

"Come!" said Danny shortly. "Your building isn't so urgent as all that. I don't see the whole earth swarming with wild pig."

The man scowled.

"The *tuan* is *orang puteh*, a white man. He should remember things are not as they were before."

"Yes," said Danny. "There have been ill-chance and foolishness among my people, but not those things only. There have also been kindness and service. Nor is all the tale told yet. But it is of other things I wish to speak now. Will you tell me this? Are there Japanese men in the *kampong* there?"

"No, *tuan*."

"Very good. Then there is a question I would ask you. I have come back through the lines of our enemies to find out the fate of my young wife and my small son. We lived in Kuala Lumpur, and on a certain day——"

But he got no further than that. Something had happened to the man. His eyes dilated with fear. He tried to speak but for several seconds could not. At last the sounds came.

"Is . . . the *tuan* speaking . . . of a woman . . there was a child with her . . .?"

"Yes, man, yes! Quick!" He seized the man's shoulder and grasped it so hard he almost crushed it. "What can you tell me of them? A small boy was it? With yellow hair? Are they in this place? Tell me——"

But in that moment his hand was grasping empty air. The man had torn himself away, and had run like lightning back into the *kampong*. There was an old man there, bent and toothless, about to ascend the ladder trussed against his house. He turned as the younger man came up to him. The younger man paused long enough to call out a few words, then ran on and disappeared into the palm plantation at the further end of the *kampong*.

"I'll be—what the hell——" Danny stammered. "Is he mad?" He was half-way across the *kampong* before he was aware he was running at all. A chicken squawked. A mother scooped her naked baby out of the way. The man was already half-way through the grove. In a few seconds he'd be in the jungle. Danny stopped. He

was not many yards away from the old man whom the younger man had addressed. He strode over to him and gripped his arms above the elbow.

"What did that fellow say to you?" he cried. "What do you know of my wife and child? Have they been this way?"

"I have no notion," the old man mumbled, "what the *tuan* is talking about."

"Now, listen," Danny brought out grimly. "Tell me all you know, or by God I'll make this place such a wilderness not even the pigs will live in it."

"Softly, now, softly!" said the other. "It would be wiser if you let my arms go, *tuan*." Despite the toothless gums and the bent back, he had dignity. "I am in my own place. The *tuan* is a stranger here."

"You're right, father," said Danny, opening his hands and bringing them to his sides again. "I ask pardon for the rough speech and the rough handling. I have come back into these regions because my heart is heavy with loss and torn with doubt. There is danger in my coming back, that you know as well as I. If you or any of the dwellers in this *kampong* wish to let it be known to the Japanese men that an English *tuan* has come among you, I know that the jungle is neither broad nor dark enough to save me from them. But I believe you will not do so. My people have not deserved ill of you."

The old man bowed slightly. Then he placed the back of his hand against his forehead, then against his lips. Then he let it fall again.

"I will tell you in few words," Danny went on, "the tale of this loss and this doubt." He began to tell his tale. A crowd of villagers had gathered round by this time, having come out of their houses and from the edges of their paddy fields. The old man said nothing, but stood there, his eyes fixed on the ground. No one else uttered a word. They might have been a group of statuary.

"Well," cried Danny, "why do you not speak? I stand waiting."

"There is nothing to say," the old man brought out, not raising his eyes. "We know nothing of these matters."

"But for God's sake what did your kinsman mean? *He* knew. He knew of a woman and a child with her that came to these parts I command you to tell me!"

"He is strange, that one. He speaks of things that are not.'

"I don't believe you!"

The old man's jaw set sullenly.

"So be it!"

Danny turned desperately on the group of natives gathered round him.

"You have heard my tale," he cried. "There must be one among you who has news to give me!" He looked round. They were like

a group of schoolchildren in the presence of a hectoring schoolmaster. Their eyes were on the ground.

Then a thought occurred to him. They were poor folk, after all, full of cupidity. He had money.

"Whosoever speaks to me, there is money for him." He waited. There was a slow shuffling of naked feet in the dry, hot dust. A man moved his *baju* from the hairs above his breast-bone, and scratched, then let the garment slip down again. But no one lifted an eye. No one spoke.

He felt the knowledge at the bottom of his heart like a stone. Whatever these people knew, there would be no word for him. They knew something, he had no doubt of that. But they also knew what had befallen the *kampong* of Gidong. They would not speak.

He looked round mournfully. They were people far removed from him in occupation, condition, race; but they were human, as he was, men with women-folk, wives, sisters, children. Was it possible such wretchedness as his made no mark, not the slightest, on any of their hearts? He looked round from face to face. No, not the slightest.

He felt his automatic hot and heavy in the pocket of his tunic. But what good would it do to threaten, still less to kill? Whom would it benefit? Helen and Edward? No, not them. These people were not cowards. If they had not spoken out of kindness, they would not speak out of fear.

He addressed the old man for the last time.

"No word for me, father? Not one word?"

The old man did not speak. The younger turned on his heel sharply away.

IV

He spent four more days inside and on the fringes of the Galah Forest Reserve, inquiring among the sparse *kampongs* if there was news of his wife and son. Whether they were lying or not he could not tell, but he could not find the slightest trace of them anywhere.

On the fifth morning he realized he had no right to delay any longer the prosecution of his official business. For the next few weeks he devoted himself to his job with ardour, though he did not forbear from making inquiries about his loved ones wherever he went. Once the trail led him to a house on the outskirts of Malacca, where he heard that an Englishwoman and a small girl were in hiding. It seemed to him that Helen might well have dressed Edward up as a girl, either to cover his real identity, or because the child needed clothes and she was thankful to dress him in anything she could lay hands on.

But the woman on the outskirts of Malacca was not an Englishwoman. She was some sort of White Russian lady from Harbin.

who had kept a café, called almost certainly "The Samovar", in Penang. The child was, in fact, a girl, not a boy. And they were not in hiding. She was living quite patently with a Japanese photographer, who was still pursuing his calling. There was at all events no political indecency in the union, for the two nations (if it could be said the lady had a nation) were not at war. Danny returned to the good work he was doing on the stretch of railway in his own area, roughly between Kuala Lumpur and Tampin. "Mather of Malaya," he called himself facetiously. It was an odd sort of augury, he thought, that for some years his favourite book had been *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and there was little he did not know about the art of planting "tulips" under railway sleepers, as expounded and practised by the master, Lawrence, and his adept pupil, Peake Pasha.

By this time Danny had achieved some of those contacts of which His Nibs had advised him in Singapore. They were a motley crowd, ranging from the most impeccable Etonian British, through fanatical Chinese politicians and suave Indian clerks, to native Malays whose especial job was to look a good deal more lazy and stupid than they were. In fact they included representatives of most of the races which had resided in Malaya with a fair amount of mutual good feeling this last half-century and more. The principal exceptions were the Japanese themselves, and the dart-blowing Sakai of the Eastern jungles, who were not considered advanced enough to be enlisted for the sophisticated activities of a fifth column.

The tale of those activities, on railway-line and road-bridge, telephone-wire and electric cable, in tin mine and rubber estate, was one of which Danny Mather told few details or none, that evening in the Barleycorn, to the blonde lady whose acquaintance he had so recently made. She was more interested in the less technical aspects of his narrative, and he got on with them, though he perceived with concern that both her glass and his own were empty.

"Oh, my God, Stella!" he said. "Have another, won't you?" But, of course, he did not wait until she said: "I don't mind if I do, dear." He had another, too. They both had another after that. It was extraordinary how many Danny had always been able to stow away without disturbing the clarity of his diction or the consecutiveness of his thoughts. The end came quite suddenly, as a rule. Stella was, evidently, the same sort of drinker, too. All that happened to her was that the natural colour of her cheeks seeped like the sun's corona round the central globes of rouge, and her eyes became even more dewy and tender than before. They were good drinking companions.

"I'd like you to come back in about three or four weeks, if you can make it." Those were the words of His Nibs during Danny's last interview with him in Singapore. "That'll give us both a chance.

You could do quite a tidy bit of damage, and perhaps build up a bit of an organization between you."

The weeks went by. They had done quite a tidy bit of damage. They had built up an organization between them. Three or four weeks. "I suppose," His Nibs had speculated, "there'll be a Singapore to come back to."

To those fellows up there it seemed pretty evident quite soon there wasn't going to be a Singapore to go back to. They seemed to see it a lot more clearly than the folk in Singapore, to judge from some of the rose-red stuff that came across the ether from the Impregnable Fortress. Perhaps the orators in Singapore knew there was no chance from the beginning, but felt they had to put across that line of talk for the sake of morale. Perhaps they really believed it; they were looking at it from outside, in a manner of speaking. The fellows with Danny didn't; they were looking at it from within. They knew Singapore was done for.

Well, what about trying to get back while the going was good? One fellow named Warburton got direct orders to go, and he went. The orders were delivered by Malay runner. It was a pity Singapore had to go so soon, they were building up a useful system of communication, by runner and short-wave radio. But none of the others had had much thought from the beginning they were going to get back, even if Singapore had held out a good deal longer than it actually did. It wasn't the sort of job where you're supposed to do much thinking about getting back. They could perhaps get back by Sumatra or Java, they told themselves vaguely, when the time came; or a submarine might bob up from somewhere.

The fact remained. "I'd like you back," His Nibs had said, "in three or four weeks, if you can make it." Well, he hadn't been able to make it, and now Singapore had fallen. There was nothing to do but get on with it. And keep his eyes and ears open for news from Helen whenever the job carried him to Seremban, and parts adjoining.

Then one day, some three weeks after Singapore had fallen, a thing happened which gave Danny a pretty bad five minutes. It took him only five minutes to make up his mind, but in more than one sense that was a very long time. In the amount of perplexity and anguish it caused him, it seemed to last for hours. On the other hand, he should have said without a moment's hesitation: "All right, Halliday, we're off!" (The fellow's name was Halliday.) But he didn't. He had a gruelling five minutes first.

What happened was this. He was hiding out in the house of one Haji Hamid, not far from Tampin, which he and the "lads", as they jocularly called themselves, used as their place of rendezvous when they were operating in that region. He was expecting Halliday at six o'clock, an hour before sunrise—they did a good deal of travelling at night, of course. But it was only about five when he

heard the four notes of the bird-whistle by which the "lads" identified themselves.

He looked at the phosphorescent hands of his watch, then got up from his mat.

"He's a bit early," he murmured. Then he addressed Haji Hamid, that admirable and co-operative gentleman. "It is the *tuan* I was expecting," he said. "May he enter? We'll be setting out soon."

The floor creaked as Haji Hamid rose.

"He is welcome. You will both break your fasts before you set out."

Danny stepped over the railings which separated the living-room from its outer balcony, then repeated softly the four bird-notes. A few moments later a dim figure glided forward out of a grove of palms and stood at the foot of the ladder.

"Basket of fish," whispered the new-comer. No, it was not Halliday, but it was one who knew the words. He was all right. It seemed like one of the Malay boys.

"Sack of rice," responded Danny. "Ascend." The fellow entered. "Who are you?" His hand was on the automatic. No point in taking chances.

"It is I, Mamat." Oh, yes. It was young Mamat. A stout kid, one of the best.

"Welcome, Mamat. What brings you here? I wasn't expecting you. Is there bad news?"

"No, *tuan*, it is not bad news. I come with a message from the *tuan's* friend, *tuan* Pond."

"*Tuan* Pond? But he's dead! They captured him, didn't they? Isn't it true, then? Is he all right?"

"Alas, it is true he is dead. They captured him, but it was only his dead body they came upon. They shot him, and as he lay dying there, hidden in the reeds of the marsh, he made me deliver a message for the *tuan*. It is news, he said, of great import for him. He was on his way to deliver it with his own lips, but it was fated otherwise."

Danny's heart turned over sickeningly. There was only one piece of news that could be of great import to him.

"Speak then!" he commanded harshly. Was it possible it was not another of those false clues which led to nothing but a dose of deadly disappointment at the end of a back-breaking trail?

"It is news of a white woman, an Englishwoman, and her child, with yellow hair."

It seemed to Danny his heart was swelling there behind his ribs till it must burst.

"Yes?" he whispered. "Yes?"

"They were hidden in a house in a fishing-village up the Klang River, in a creek below Pulau Lumut. One day or the next day a

sampan was to come for them and take them southward." Mamat paused. He seemed to be searching his memory for a word of the message he might not have remembered. "There were not more words"—the boy's voice quivered—"there were not more words than that. The *tuan's* words were difficult in his throat!"

"When was this? When did he tell you this?" cried Danny, seizing Mamat by the shoulder. "Was that all he said?"

"I was to come to you, *tuan* Mather," he said. "It was news of great import to you."

"Yes, yes! When was this, I ask you?"

The boy stood in the darkness there, marking out days with a finger of one hand on the fingers of the other.

"It was ten days, twelve. I do not know. Perhaps more days than that."

"Why haven't you sought me out earlier, Mamat? Oh, why did you not?"

"I grieve much," said the other unhappily. "I, too, received some metal in the leg. It was not easy to move the first few days. And it was not easy to find out in which territory the *tuan* was carrying out his labours."

"Can you tell me this? Did *tuan* Pond himself see the woman. and the small child, or was it by hearsay he knew of it?"

"I cannot say, alas, *tuan*. He lay there, on that small island of dry land, and I thought his spirit was already leaving him. Then it was as if he remembered something, and he gathered up his dying-away strength in order to speak those words that I have brought from him."

"Ten days ago, twelve days." Danny stood there murmuring. "The Island fell—how long ago?—twenty-one days. You cannot say at all," he begged wistfully, "if the woman and child got away in such time that . . . they may have reached the Island . . . before it fell?"

Mamat hung his head.

"No, *tuan*, I cannot say."

"Or, of course, if they got away at all." The heart now had contracted again. It lay there, dull and heavy, like a lump of lead. "They may even be in that place now."

"Yes. Even so."

There was silence for a minute or two.

"I must go forth to find out what I can," Danny said at length.

"I will go forth with the *tuan*, if he thinks I might be of help," the other said quietly.

"At once, Mamat?" He was accustomed now to coming and going at the shortest notice; or at none at all.

"At once, *tuan*."

He turned to Haji Hamid.

"The young Mamat brings me news, you will have understood, which is as life and death to me." He stooped, and felt around till his hands lit upon his attaché-case, in the deeper darkness up against the wall. "If I do not return," he went on, "Mamat, I trust, will return. He will give you my tidings. I give you now my thanks." He held out his hand.

"Allah be with you," said Haji Hamid. They shook hands warmly. "Before you set out, I beg you, refresh yourselves. So that you are not faint on the journey. And if you are gone before the other *tuan* arrives, shall I tell him of Mamat's coming, and the news he brought? Or what shall be the message I deliver to him?"

Danny stopped. It was as if the flat of a hand had suddenly come up and pushed against his face, to hold him dead where he stood. Good God! He was forgetting Halliday! Halliday should be here in not many minutes. He could not go off without saying a word to Halliday.

"Of course," he muttered. "I shall await the *tuan*. Perhaps you will of your kindness let Mamat eat and drink. For myself, I could not." He sat down again listlessly. "Sit down, Mamat," he requested. "Forgive me. I forget the hurt leg. I trust it is well now."

"The leg is well," the other said. "The *tuan* is kind." Mamat sat down, too, the leg stretched straight before him.

Haji Hamid walked over to the opposite corner of the room to prepare food and drink.

Ten minutes later the four notes of the bird-whistle sounded again.

"He is there," murmured Danny, "the *tuan*." He rose and gave the response. A few moments later, the necessary words interchanged. Halliday was up in the room with them. He looked round. His sharp eyes perceived there were three people there, apparently more than he was expecting.

"Hello, everybody!" he exclaimed. "Quite a party!"

"It's all right," Danny said quickly. "This is young Mamat. You know him. And this is our friend, Haji Hamid."

"That's fine. The news is good, Haji Hamid? Hello, Mamat! I'm glad you're here, Mather. I was afraid you mightn't have got here yet."

"I've been here three or four hours. I had to beat it quick."

"Well, let's get cracking, Mather! I've got a spot of excitement for you! We're in luck!"

"Yes, what is it?" Danny asked quietly. There was a nausea in the pit of his stomach.

"I'll tell you!" You could make him out rubbing his hands in the darkness there. "You know old Hedy? She's a good one, she is! This time she's turned up trumps, good and proper!"

Yes, Danny knew old Hedy. Several of the "lads" up and down

the country were working with short-wave wireless sets. They had been wireless fans for years, and now they had an opportunity to show how good they were. They were very fond of their wireless sets. Hedy they called them, or Greta, or Marlene. Yes, Danny knew old Hedy.

"Well, I had Hedy on at 'receive'," continued Halliday. "Just snooping round, as usual, to see if there was anything meaty to pick up. And was there something meaty! Boy, I nearly jumped out of my skin! The first thing I heard was: 'Take that, you little yellow bastard!' Just like that, Mather, straight out of the blue. '*Tike* that!' I should say. The gent was talking Austrilian. It sounded exactly like the B.B.C. putting on one of those wireless plays. Then I heard a crack, a hell of a crack. It must have been a foot or two away from the transmitter. Revolver. Tommy-gun perhaps. Then the voice went on: 'Maybe we can't fly! But we bloody well can shoot!' Then there was a goddam awful howling, then it all snapped off. I sat there and gaped. My mind was like Piccadilly Circus on boat-race night. After a long time it quietened down a bit, and an idea began to come through. It wasn't an idea so much as a picture.

"An Australian, or rather a gang of Australians. The Japs are at 'em. They can't fly. What the hell do they mean they can't fly? It means there's water all round them, or very nearly all round them. He might as well have said they can't swim. Why can't they swim? Perhaps he meant just that they can't swim! Impossible as it may sound, there may be even Australians who can't swim. Or it may be they can't swim now. They're under fire from the other bank. And there's a school of trained crocodiles waiting for them. Anyhow they can't get away. They've got plenty of fight in them, and they've got a field radio.

"Things are obviously pretty desperate. They've got that radio, so why not use it? They've probably been sending out messages for some days. If they're near enough to the sea, one of our submarines might pick it up. Or the one chance in a hundred might come off and a girl like Hedy might be prowling round. Anyhow it can't do any harm. So they put the thing on to send, and are about to put out a message, when suddenly up springs some Jap who's been crawling forward on his belly for hours, or sloshing through the marsh, keeping his head low down. So they let him have it, him and his pals, if there's more than one of them.

"See? Well, where is it all getting us to? You know the radius of reception of these field sets is limited. The Australian wasn't more than twenty miles away. But that's where the Muar River is—where there was all that fighting. So the Japs haven't mopped it all up. There's at least one place where our chaps are still holding out. I presume there's more than one Australian there with a few Indians and British thrown in, maybe. There they are, surrounded by water and by Japs. It must be an island, or a peninsula, or

something. I get out my map. Do you mind letting me have a bit of a light on the proceedings, Haji Hamid? Thank you. Do you see? It's a picnic. This is where I was at the time—where *we* were, I mean, Hedy and me. Here's the river, see? The fun's going on twenty miles away or less. Do you see this neck of land where the river winds round? It can't be anywhere else. That's the place, boy!

"So I take the five-thirty express to see what I can find out. Exactly as I worked it out, my dear Watson. I didn't dare to come in *too* close, because if I got bumped off the whole bunch would be in the soup. But I moved up quite close enough, and got some extra information on the side, from some of the fishermen down there. There's some twenty or so of our men still holding out on that neck of land, with about thirty Japs bottling up the neck, which is about a quarter of a mile wide. They're sitting pretty. All they've got to do is to wait and lob a few shells over now and again. They've got a mortar. A Jap 'plane could mop up our boys with a few bombs, but their 'planes are probably too busy in Sumatra and Java. Or it may be that the local one-pip wants to keep the honour and glory to himself. It's in the bag. They can't get away on the river side, it's all filthy deep mud and crocodiles and mangrove-roots. And the Japs have got a nice detachment over on the opposite bank of the river, too.

"Well, old Clausewitz gets to work—that's me. Here's the plan of campaign. It only needs two or three of us, I think. It wouldn't do much harm if we could rake in another couple, excepting that the more we are, the more difficult it is to approach unobserved. Anyhow, there's no time to go scouting round. If we could manage to creep up on that neck of land at dead of night from opposite directions, with somebody goosing up from the rear, maybe, and then at zero hour we suddenly popped off a few guns and banged a few tin cans and yelled our heads off . . . you know, generally give the impression we're an army corps . . . we've created a diversion. That's the word—a diversion. Of course, somehow our chaps have got to be put wise to the fact that a diversion is in the offing, so that they can take advantage of it. Forward the Light Brigade! Wild consternation in the enemy ranks! We clout a few skulls, slit a few throats—the more the merrier. Why not? No entertainment tax. Then we make the hell of a quick get-away.

"You see, Mather, old boy? Simple as two's two. Coming?"

"Good work, Halliday, damn good work. I say, Halliday!"

"Yes?"

"Do you mind if I just go off into a corner and think something out for five minutes? Time me, will you?"

"Certainly, old boy."

Danny went off into a corner, as he said, and thought something out for five minutes. To Halliday it seemed five minutes, perhaps a

bit more, perhaps a bit less. To Danny it seemed a lot longer than that. At length he came back again.

"All right, Halliday, let's go! As soon as you like, Mr. Clausewitz. I think we might have young Mamat in on this, if he wants to come. He happens to be here. There may be a few details we might try and work out first. If you don't mind," he added diffidently. After all, it was Halliday's show.

"By all means," Halliday conceded magnanimously. "But I say, I wonder if I could first do a bit of a wash and brush-up? Is that all right, Haji Hamid?"

V

Danny suspended his narrative, there in the Saloon Bar of the Barleycorn.

"Me, too," said Danny.

"Me, too," said Stella.

They both went and had a bit of a wash and brush-up. He was back first, of course.

"I think you've about had your ration, Stella," he informed her. "I've talked your head off."

"If you stop now," she warned him, "I'll scream! Did it come out like that?"

He had their glasses filled. Audrey looked at Mr. Hardacre and Mr. Hardacre looked at Audrey. But the situation was out of hand now. They had their glasses filled.

"It came out exactly like that. You've no idea!"

"Oo!" she breathed, and clapped her hands two or three times. There was quite a lot of the small girl about her, and still something of the small boy about him, though it was an orgy of whisky, not ice cream and lemonade.

"We took Mamat along with us. He'd already gathered from Halliday's manner, and the few words of English he understood, that there was something exciting afoot. It couldn't have been done without Mamat. He had the job of crawling through the Japanese holding-party to our own chaps out on the neck of land, and tipping them off. It was a tough job. He was as liable to get it from us as from them. We didn't see him again. The Japs must have got him when he came out again with our fellows. Pity! Grand kid!

"Halliday had old Hedy with him, of course—couldn't stir a foot without Hedy. We had to get a signal from our chaps to show that Mamat had got through safely and given them the dope; and to agree that our plan was O.K. by them. We'd assumed that they'd been transmitting messages into the ether on the off-chance somebody might pick something up. And somebody did, God bless her. Still another message from their transmitter couldn't

arouse any suspicion, we argued. All they had to do was work in the word 'beef'. And they did, sweet as honey.

"We'd suggested they should creep up from their side as close as they dared to the Jap positions; so did we from our side. And there we were, waiting for zero hour, one ackemma; it was like being the spring of a watch—all coiled up, somehow, inside. It was our turn first. We made such a hideous din yelling and roaring and beating tin cans and firing off our firearms, we scared the wits out of ourselves. You can imagine how it scared them. They started howling even louder than we did, and that scared them still more. I'm quite sure they thought we were a bunch of blue devils, for a time, anyhow. By this time the other lads were yelling their heads off, too, as they advanced on to the barbed wire shooting off all their stuff. Some yelled, some were very, very quiet. That was a night of the long knives, that was. I got a couple of Japs myself, just under the shoulder-blades. See here?" He slewed his hand round to show her.

The girl looked with appalled, entranced eyes.

"I was glad I had that knife with me. I'd brought it to slash my way through the jungle undergrowth. It's across there now, in that old case of mine. Well, the love-feast couldn't last for ever. They were beginning to collect themselves after the first shock. There was gunfire from the other side of the river, too. They were probably swarming across in their sampans.

"So we made off. There wasn't time to do much stock-taking, but we gathered we'd lost about ten or a dozen men. They must have lost at least twice as many. We'd arranged back at Haji Hamid's that if the thing came off we'd split into two groups. And we did so. That made it likelier for one party to get off, anyway. We'd arranged that one party would make east and try for a stretch of scrubland beyond the native-owned rubber estates, and lie low for a week or so. Not even a hedge-hopping plane could spot you at the base of that twelve-foot-high elephant-grass. They'd be better off than they had been, surrounded in that neck of land; that was about all you could say.

"Later on they could dribble off towards the west and hope for he best. The other party relied on shock tactics. The country south-westward was a nondescript region of jungle and mangrove-swamp. The second party would make as fast as it knew how towards a creek about fifteen miles away as the crow flies, where a tiny fishing-village called Batu Laut was perched up above the mud and smells. Then it would try for an immediate getaway, in a sampan or junk or something. As a short-term job it was perhaps more dangerous, but you'd know where you were pretty quickly.

"We'd tossed up for it back at Haji Hamid's. There was absolutely nothing else to do. In one way I wanted to stay on out there and make for the Klang River, following up the message that Pond had conveyed to me through the lips of Mamat. And then

the old uncertainty began again. Was it really Helen and Edward that had been hiding out up there? If it had been Helen and Edward they might have escaped from Malaya by now. Was it fair to me, or to them, that I should give up my chance of getting away from Malaya, too, and joining up with them somewhere? I knew old Halliday would have let me take charge of either party like a shot if I'd have asked him. But it wasn't fair to Halliday to make him share the responsibility, was it?

"So, I say, we tossed up for it, and I got the party that was going to make a bolt south-westward for the coast. As you see, we made it. I haven't an idea what happened to Halliday and his gang. I don't suppose anybody will ever know till after the war—if then. We made it. It was a pretty exciting time, all the more because we couldn't make out for a time whether or not they were on our scent."

He paused, plucking at the rim of his glass as if it were the string of an instrument.

"I didn't tell you about that kid from the East Surreys, did I? No, I don't think I did, but I've kept on thinking of him all day long. What was his name? Yes, Alf Bessel, a Cockney lad from Islington. We were splashing our way through a marshy bottom in the jungle, not thinking of anything in particular, except that we were bloody miserable, with ants and wasps and leeches and one thing and another.

"Then, suddenly: Ping! Just once, from nowhere, from nobody, like a sort of black magic, from all the trees and all the creepers rolled into the barrel of a single gun. Ping! I suppose it was a Jap; there's no particular reason to imagine it was anyone else. But nothing went before, nothing went after. And there was that kid Bessel, hand up to his collar-bone, staggering about as if he was in a ring, and someone had punched him silly, but he'd rather not lie down if it was just the same to everybody. Dead white he was, like that newspaper. Then you saw the blood come oozing out gently on either side of his hand. Then very slowly, with an odd sort of grace . . . I remember thinking that at the time . . . funny what things you think of . . . like a dancer almost, he leaned over and glided down towards the ground. By that time, one or two of us had reached him. We saw the neat little hole, and the blood coming out from the soft tissue . . . the other blood was oozing inside. We felt at once he was a goner. I don't think I ever saw a bunch of men so mad as those Aussies were then. They forgot we were slinking away on tip-toe with a ruthless enemy sniffing the air all round us, itching to slit our throats. They forgot that from the point of view of winning a war one dead man's a better proposition than ten. They raised hell. They went round slashing with their knives at every clotted clump of greenery within reach. They fired off almost all the ammunition they had into the trees over our heads. And they swore. If that didn't kill him, or

them, or it, or whatever it was, a bullet couldn't have done it any more harm than a feather.

"But there was nothing anywhere, nothing. They came to their senses at last, and I ordered them to keep on moving. There was a stream hard by, and I reckoned they couldn't go wrong if they followed its course till nightfall, when Alf and I could join them. I knew there wasn't one chance in a hundred that Alf would get there, and if Alf was still alive, then I wouldn't be there, either. I'd be still in the swamp, with Alf. When they protested, I pointed out they were just a bunch of Aussies, ranchers from Queensland, clerks from Sydney, they didn't know the jungle as I did ; I could move at least twice as fast as they did. I didn't mention my own private crop of bugs, that felt as if they were going on a route-march any minute now. But the important thing was that I was the only Englishman in the crowd. Seeing the kid was probably going to kick the bucket, out there, a lot further than the back of beyond, I felt it might be a bit easier for him with somebody from home. So they went off, all except a little Gurkha we had with us. He insisted on staying to help us do a spot of bandaging—though all we had between us was a lump of shirt.

"Then he went off, too. It was just Alf and me and the things of the swamp and the jungle, a ticking, a whirring, a wheezing, it was all a bit creepy. We had quite a bit of a chat together about Islington, where he came from, and Camberley, where he did his training, and what a silly sort of war this was ; it wasn't 'arf a lark, he thought, it didn't give a fellow a charnce. I think he was mixing up something he'd been through in the earlier stage of the campaign with the thing that had just happened. But it was all the same thing. 'You can't see a thing,' says Alf, the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. 'Then bash ! That lump of leaves ain't no leaves, it's a sniper ! And it's your lot ! It ain't right, guv'nor, is it ?'

"And in a manner of speaking it wasn't right, either. He died in under an hour. There wasn't much I could do about it, just cover him over with some moss and lichen and stuff, and I did that, and went on.

"I went on," he repeated. "And I got lost." He was silent for some time. "Perhaps my mind was on other things, and I didn't keep my nose straight. Somehow, that Cockney boy dying, and Helen and Edward, and all the pleasant people I'd known out in Malaya, and so many of them lost or dead . . . it all got tied up in my mind. I was pretty blue. And the bugs moved over, and opened their eyes, and started kicking. Yes, I was pretty blue. You might even say I didn't care which way I was going, and whether I got anywhere or not. I seem to remember that stream let me down pretty quickly, it started splitting up and meandering round. The Aussies left signs for me, they told me later, marking the way they'd gone, but my eyes and mind were too dim to see

anything. Perhaps the same thing happened to the little Gurkha; he never joined on again, either. It went on like that for some time, in that country of swamp and dyke, mud-flat and mangrove-thicket. Then I said to myself: This won't do. There's other fellows involved in this besides yourself. You'd better look lively, and get on your course again. It was then I realized how lost I was, how good and lost. . . . It was not till twelve hours later I caught up with them. For a bunch of Aussies they were positively fulsome. I was pretty glad to see them, too. A few hours after we made that fishing-village I told you of, Batu Laut.

"Well, to get on with it; a bit down-stream from the cluster of fishermen's huts a Chinese junk was moored up against a tiny jetty. There were a few sampans around, but we decided they wouldn't quite fill the bill. We were going to make a break for Sumatra, and we felt we needed something solid under us if we were to have a chance of getting there.

"I've no doubt between us we could have sailed the junk, so far as just sailing her goes. She was the regular box-built contraption with an overhanging stern, and the well-setting sails which anyone can handle. But we were pretty hazy about the islands in the Straits of Malacca, and hadn't the faintest idea about the shoals and sandbanks we'd have to negotiate before we left the creek and got out into open water. But we didn't have to worry. The gentleman who owned the junk was fast asleep on the deck, his head pillowed on a sack of something and a bit of cloth flung over his face; to protect it from the sun, I suppose—the insects wouldn't have had much truck with it.

"So we boarded her. That was simple. Then we tried to waken the gentleman. He was a Chinese, as we'd already concluded from his rig-out. It wasn't so simple to waken him; he'd obviously been on a bit of an opium bat, and he lay there smiling sweetly, though we kicked him quite hard. However, we thought it better to lose no time. We cast off, and poled our way into mid-stream, and then while one or two of the fellows began to hoist sail, I went on trying to bring him round.

"At last he opened an eye. Then he shut it again, thinking he was still dreaming. Then he opened it again. Then he let out a yell. He got very angry indeed all in one movement. He requested us to put back at once, or God knows what he wouldn't do to us. He talked in Malay. We found out later he'd spent most of his life carrying stuff up and down these East Coast creeks to the fishing-villages, and he did a bit of fishing himself on the side. He believed in taking things easy. He had his junk, his pipe, his fishing-nets, he was all right. It was his idea to lie to, till things settled down a bit. He wasn't one of those political Chinese at all.

"Well, we needed his help. We wanted him with us, if possible, not against us. So I did a bit of quick thinking. While he was

carrying on like that I let myself down quickly into the little locker he had amidships. That's about all you could call it. I fumbled around a bit, and found what I was looking for—his stock of opium, his bamboo pipe, his steel skewers and the lamp on which he toasted the stuff. But all I needed was the opium. I let myself up on deck again and told him to calm down. I told him I'd purloined his dope.

"'Listen, old boy,' I said. 'You're coming with us whether you want to or not. You can't do anything about it. We want your help. You want your opium. Now, quiet, will you? It's your vessel, and we want you to take charge. We're making for Sumatra. You know the way out of this creek, and you know your way through the islands, at least part of the way. If you're a good boy, we'll pay you for everything, your time and services, and whatever stores you have on board. And you can have your opium when you want it. If you're not going to be a good boy—well, there you are. You'll not be our skipper, you'll be our passenger instead, and no opium, no nothing.

"'How about it, skipper? Going to be a good boy?'

"He was an angry skipper for some time. Then he was a sulky skipper. Then, when we very nearly ran her aground on a mud shoal, he suddenly became an energetic skipper. After that he was as good as gold with his dope or without it. Ah Chiang was his name. He came to a sticky end, but he wasn't the only one. He never went back to Batu Pahat. I suppose he had an old woman there, who'd look up from the rice she was husking for his dinner, and grin at him with gums as red as a peony. He never went back to his mat and his pipe and his fish-baskets. And young Gillett never went back to his job on the paper in Perth; he'd only been a sub-editor till then, but they were going to make him foreign editor when he got back to Australia.

"I'm getting the heeby-jeebies, Stella. We've both had enough of this. Knock that drink back, Stella. Let's go somewhere else. How about it?" He was beginning to get a bit restive, to develop a twitch in the limbs. He wanted to get moving. It felt somehow as if he had a date with someone somewhere. But she kept him at it. She gurgled now and again and now and again she clapped her hands.

The story was getting rather incoherent, not in the manner of its delivery—the consonants were still impeccable—but in its presentation. He would repeat himself, or refer to people and events regarding which he had not previously uttered a syllable. But that didn't matter to Stella Bowman, so long as he kept on talking. She was drunk right enough, she was cock-eyed, though to look at her you wouldn't imagine she'd had more than two or three. She had almost got to the point where liquor wasn't effective any more to keep that nightmare picture out of her mind . . . the aeroplane lying on the ground, smouldering, with its back broken

and the broken young man at the heart of the aeroplane, smouldering, too, like a grease-rag or a lump of wood.

"Go on, Danny!" she implored him. "Yes? Yes? *Please* go on!"

And he went on. He managed somehow. This is the rest of the story, more coherently written down than he uttered it.

"So we got out of that creek all right, and stood out fair in the Straits of Malacca. The idea was to tie her up by day in some little anchorage in the islands, and make the next stage by night, but it didn't always work like that. Quite a lot happened. Once in the grey of dawn we saw something floating towards us that at first we took for an out-size coconut. Then we saw the pointed warts it had, not a bit like any coconut. We realized it was a mine bobbing and dipping straight for us. Before long we saw another. We realized we were ploughing straight across a minefield. It didn't feel at all good. The next morning a Jap destroyer passed astern of us; we were quite sure that was curtains, but the Jap crew must have been saying their prayers or something. A few seconds later the destroyer had gone; it was only a shadow, with just the shuddering throb of the propellers and the strength of its wash to remind us how close it had been. The nights, my God, those nights! The whine of the mosquitoes in the lee of the mangroves, the sudden shock of the giant beetles crashing into your ear, the endless scratch, scratch, scratch all over your body, the drip, drip, drip all night, the peculiar heavy droning of the jungle. The other things stopped now and again, but the scratching didn't. Have you ever heard of South Sea sores? It wasn't till we'd had half a dozen antiseptic baths weeks later in Colombo that the skin began to ease up a bit.

"Yet sometimes it was so damn beautiful, you even forgot to scratch. We were approaching one of the islands one morning. I don't remember its name. There it all was, straight out of a story-book, the white sands lapped by a faint rim of surf, and the thatched huts standing up on stilts over the inlets, and a field of pineapples low down and the groves of coconut palms criss-cross against a high purple mountain rising up behind it all.

"I can't tell you how often we'd planned that very voyage, Helen and me, all the long years we lived in K.L. K.L. was all right. It was grand. But it could have been Ealing just as well."

He stopped, fiddled with his glass for a time, then thrust himself back into his narrative.

"We got as far as Sumatra, all but a few miles. Then we heard the engine of that damn 'plane. It wasn't the first Jap 'plane we'd sighted; and I don't suppose it was the first Jap 'plane that had sighted us. But the others hadn't worried. They flew on. So did

this one I'm talking about, and we grinned at each other cheerfully. Then something happened. The fellow up there thought better of it. There was something about us he didn't like. He made a wide turn and came back towards us. He circled round us lower and lower. We did all we could to look as if we were just lumps of sacking, but we didn't convince him. Then he let go. We could see the bomb make for us gracefully, taking its time about it. It was funny how naked you felt. The bomb was a near miss, near enough to tear the old junk to pieces. I remember very clearly standing on the deck one moment, my hand on the grip of the attaché-case. Then I was in the air rising, then in the air falling, then the water had closed over me, and I was going down, down, down. It seemed a hell of a long way down. Then at last I began going up again. When I got to the top, all I knew was I still had the old attaché-case in my hand. Well, it seemed the moment had come to say good-bye to it. I'm not a bad swimmer. In water as warm as that the three or four miles to the shore shouldn't have been too much for me. But I'd need both arms for it. I couldn't carry on with a leather bag that already felt as heavy as a sack of coke. I knew I'd have to let it go, and it felt as if someone had a knife inside me and was going to cut off a chunk behind the ribs. Now do you see why I made such a song and dance about that case when I found I'd left the thing in the house across there? It was bloody. And just at that moment a lump of wreckage from the old junk bobbed up beside me. It's not good-bye yet, I said. I scrambled aboard the piece of timber and got astride it. I don't quite know how I managed it, but I did. Try it yourself some time. I started off towards the shore, paddling and kicking, paddling and kicking. I knew if I could keep my head I could make it.

"Then that 'plane appeared on the scene again and started machine-gunning us down in the water there. I could see the bastard grinning, his teeth sticking out like those lumps of orange-peel kids sometimes slap into their mouths. It was then Ah Chiang got it, straight between the temples. So did Gillett, the young journalist. I was next on the programme. I could hear the bullet coming for me in a straight line, spitting and jumping off the water. I ducked my head and said a little prayer. It worked the trick. They missed, and I carried on, and got there. There were six survivors all told."

He stopped for some reason, and looked round, as if he was not quite sure he had got the count right. She tinkled her whisky-glass against his. Both drank.

"He wouldn't have made it," murmured Danny. "He had it coming to him. If it hadn't been up in the Muar mangrove-swamps it would have been out here, off the Sumatra shore."

Stella screwed up her eyes. She wasn't with him at all.

"I'd like to have seen his little woman. Salterton Road, Islington. It was in his pay-book, as he said."

Islington? The way he jumped about, like a pea on a drum. islington. No, she hadn't got it any more.

"You've got loads of time," she brought out. It seemed a fairly safe thing to say.

He looked at her and smiled. She went all over funny the way he smiled, like somebody slipping a lump of ice down your blouse.

"Go on!" her lips went, with no sound in them.

He told her about the walk across Sumatra, to a village up a creek some distance north of Padang. It was a confused and confusing tale. Time and space were like two lengths of elastic, now relaxed and shrivelled into inches, now distended further than you could see. No listener could have deduced whether the journey took days or weeks, whether the ground covered was a promenade, or a vast region as wide as a country. No listener could have deduced how they made it. Did they sail, did they swim, did they fly, did they walk? Or did they do something of all these? They thrust deep into the island by river-craft, you might have gathered at one moment. The next moment they were flying. Did he mean *flying*, in the Japanese-possessed air? And when did they get into that motor-lorry, and when get out of it? What of those days—was it days?—when they scrambled on blistered feet along a dry torrent-bed, and mosquitoes attacked them as large as locusts? All the food they had for one lengthy period was some tins of condensed milk. Condensed milk? That was odd provender. Who was in the party still? Milligan, Jarvis—those names came once and again—Higgins, Irwin. But there were moments when it seemed he was talking of a multitude.

"And there we met the old Dutchman," he announced. (That was evidently in the village north of Padang.) "Damn it, don't you remember that Dutchman?" he rebuked her. "I must say that wife of his was a corker. A Javanese girl she was. No wonder he didn't mind staying on with a dame like that to look after him. Who wouldn't? Wouldn't you? He thought we were all a lot of rabbits running from Malaya like that, leaving the natives to look after themselves. He didn't mean the fighting people, I suppose. The natives weren't their responsibility. They didn't run, either. For the most part they stayed put in Singapore. He meant us chaps, the civil services, the police, the businessmen, and so on. What sense would there have been in staying on? It was different with us. Our women were all white women. Anyhow, as far as I was concerned, the matter had been taken out of my hands. We tossed a coin—do you remember?—Halliday and me. He stayed. I went. I'd got the job of getting these Aussies out, and here they were, what was left of them. If I felt like kicking that Dutchman, it was because of his shape, not because of what he said. He had a grey-green suit and grey-green eyes, and his stomach was right up to his neck.

"But what did we care about the old man's stomach when he had that steam-launch? For God's sake, Stella! Drink up! You're going dry on me! That's better! That's fine! Same again, somebody! How's the old head?

"That was the one thing in the world that meant anything to us. I mean that steam-launch. It was the most decrepit thing anywhere in the Seven Seas. It looked as if it had been lying there at the jetty ever since they went out hunting pirates in it. The Dutchman had bought it only a few months earlier, and his idea was to do it up and sell it again, or use it for his own business, up and down the creeks and round the islands. The one thing it wasn't fit for was an ocean voyage. He warned us very clearly. If we met any rough weather out there, she'd go to pieces, he said; she'd fold up like a deck-chair. But what the hell! We had to get out of Sumatra. The Japs were swarming all over the place. The general feeling was we'd rather be drowned than stay behind to be caught by the yellow-bellies. And perhaps we wouldn't be drowned. Perhaps something would happen. As you can see, something did.

"The launch was in an awful state. She hadn't been tarred or caulked for ages, the boilers were in a filthy condition, the gauge-glasses were broken, or weren't there. and I had a hell of a job to fix them up temporarily. The only thing that held together in the whole outfit was the dinghy. That seemed quite all right, lashed down aft, with the sail neatly folded and stowed with the mast. We knew what we were facing, and we risked it. If we had to take to the dinghy, we'd have to take to it, that's all. We hardly knew what we hoped for. Perhaps one of our own planes might spot us, or maybe one of our destroyers or submarines, out foraging. Of course, it could just as easily be one of theirs that did the spotting. We preferred not to think of that. This way there was a chance of getting somewhere, the other way there wasn't.

"So we got going. We worked like blacks to stow aboard as much coal and timber as we could get hold of; we littered the place with it. We knew from the beginning how likely it was we'd have to take to that dinghy, so we saw to it she had a stock of food and drink on board, and some medical stuff. It was that fellow Milligan who took charge of that. He was a big fellow, and had a big mouth. There wasn't much he didn't know about anything. How was any one to guess he was such a nincompoop?

"Well, we got out of that creek and stood out in the open water westward. The row everything on board made! It was blue murder. We managed to get up a fair amount of speed that first day, with no trouble from anything either in the sea or under it. We're doing fine, we grinned at each other. The clouds came up towards evening, but we didn't mind that; it meant protection from scouter planes. The difficulties began at night. We couldn't see to steer because the compass-light was knocked out, and the cardinal points hadn't any luminous paint to help. The stars were

tucked away, as I told you. All we could do was to bring up a shaded oil lamp and check up with that now and again.

"It was all right while the weather remained calm, but in the morning it began to cloud up. The wind seemed to spring up from nowhere, the sea became choppy and the swell became larger from hour to hour. That evening the steering chain broke. There must have been a link worn down thin, and the strain now placed on the rudder trying to keep the old tub on her course in that weather finished it off. The temporary loss of control speeded everything up a lot. The sea poured in, particularly through that hole we'd done up on her port side. Every part of her seemed hard put to it to hold out. We managed to patch up the chain, but as the night went on everything else began to cave in. There was trouble with the engine, we couldn't get up any pressure. That evening she was leaking like a sieve. We pretended to each other she'd pull through somehow, but we knew she wouldn't. We pumped and pumped till we nearly dropped dead. But it was no good. It was like a bottle you see floating for a long time, though she's carrying a lot of water. Suddenly there's a gurgle, and the bottle dips, and she's gone. That was how the launch foundered. We barely had time to float the dinghy. It was all we could do, in that swell, to keep the dinghy's keel down and ship everyone aboard, and in the excitement we lost practically all the stores we'd stowed away in the dinghy against this very emergency. The stuff had been clumsily tied on. Milligan blamed the lashings. But it wasn't the lashings. It was Milligan. And it was the rest of us, for not checking up on him. Anyhow, we managed to get out the oars and hoist sail, and we set off . . . westward for India. Do you hear, Stella? Westward for India. Just like that," said Danny, and flicked the tips of his fingers along the palm of his hand.

"The sea had calmed down a bit by that time, or we could never have made it. Oh, yes, the sea calmed down. By noon next day there wasn't a breath of air, not a whisper. The swell subsided. The sun stood over you like a pillar of flame between sky and sea. The sea itself was like a huge hot plate. If you spat on it—that is, if you had anything to spit with—it hissed back at you.

"A day passed, a second, a third day, a week, a second week. It was tough. The mouth dry as an oven, and the eyelids inflamed till they felt like bladders. It would have been all right if we'd had some dressings, but we hadn't. A little water would have been handy, too. We managed to collect a few drops in the sail now and again, during a squall. Our things got soaked, and we sucked them dry. Then we sucked buttons.

"The chief trouble was Milligan. He began to get hysterical about the stores. He didn't blame the lashings any more, he blamed himself. It's a bad thing to get hysterical when your tongue is cracked and buckled like a cast-off shoe. He passed out. I can't tell you what day it was or even what week it was. It often happens

with the big ones. They cave in. It was a job shipping him overboard. I don't know how we did it. None of us had the strength to move his own hand.

"We didn't want to eat at all after the first week or so. We just thought it would be nice to have a drink. But there wasn't anything to drink. So we sucked buttons."

The tip of Danny's tongue stole from between his lips, and licked each incredulously, as if it could not be true they were not now as they had been then, and Milligan's, while Milligan had still been going, and Higgins's, and Jarvis's, and Irwin's. He stared outward from the table at which he and Stella Bowman sat, in the Saloon Bar of the Barleycorn, as if it were the boat in which they had sweltered, and thirsted, and almost died; as if the walls, the shelves, the bar, the people in it, and Westerleigh beyond, the red roofs, the grey church, the green-arched trees, were all mirage in a shimmering, bottomless whiteness of steaming waters.

"What's the matter, dear?" Stella begged anxiously. "What are you looking for?"

Out of the void a spire emerged, a perpendicular tangible something in the limitless extension of crawling vapour, a thing of nickel and glass. It acquired definition and content. It was a soda-water siphon. It could not be true. A soda-water siphon floating upright among these ethereal fires. He stared at it incredulously. He licked his lips again as if he savoured a phantom surf on them, the bubbles of the charged water. He heard above the mewing of the sea-birds the sudden sharp hiss as a finger pressed hard on the trigger, and the released water leapt, descended, and spread in a seethe of foam on the glass top of the table.

"Excuse *me*, Mr. Mather! Excuse *me*!" a voice said above Danny's ear. There was something of reproach in the voice, for, after all, you don't get soda-water *thrown* at you these days. Yet it might have been worse, Mr. Hardacre told himself. When a customer's put away as much as this Mr. Mather has, you can be pleased it's only soda-water, and not glasses, glasses being the price they are.

Mr. Hardacre removed the siphon and carried it over to the bar.

"I've got to do the black-out, anyway!" he explained tactfully, as if that were the real reason for his removal of the siphon.

Danny did not move.

"Excuse *me*!" repeated Mr. Hardacre patiently.

Stella tugged at Danny's sleeve.

"He's got to do the black-out!" she said.

"What? What?" Danny exclaimed, like someone suddenly wakened from sleep. "Black-out! Oh, yes, of course, black-out!" The meaning of the word flowed into his brain. "It can't be as late as that!" He turned his head and looked out through the window.

"Yes," said Stella, "it's getting on." She turned her head, too. Then something seized her attention. "Hello, Danny!" she cried. "Look! Your auntie's got a visitor!"

Danny thrust his head forward.

"So she has!" he exclaimed excitedly. A car had just drawn up and come to a stop outside The Hazels. The car was of a make he knew well. "Austin, 1937," he breathed. The same year, the same colour, as his own car, Helen's car, that now lay in a ditch over against a jungle, nine thousand miles away in Malaya.

"Well, I'll be damned!" cried Danny. He knew that Gladstone bag. He knew that old man. "It's old Dr. Charman!" The years rolled away like a fog. "What day is it? Tuesday, eh?" He turned to Stella. "He comes along twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, to tickle the toes of the old girls! Ever since Queen Anne! Isn't he a duck?"

The old man had reached the garden gate and closed it behind him. Mr. Hardcare, the publican, was still standing by to do his black-out.

"He's a naughty old man!" said Stella. "He hasn't demobilized his car!" There was a strain of punctiliousness in her make-up. "He shouldn't do that!" she said.

Danny turned to her again. His face was startled, delighted, it shone with glory. His fingers had slipped to his waistcoat pocket, and had come forth again. They held a key an inch before her eyes, the ignition key of a car.

"I knew I had to keep it!" he shouted. He reached forward, seized her arm, and swung her free of the table. "We're going for a joy-ride! Quick, Stella!"

"Oh, lovely, lovely!" she shouted. All the customers at the bar crowded towards the alcove. "You're just wonderful, Danny!"

Their cheeks and eyes were alight. They were gloriously drunk. They had, for however brief a time, attained oblivion of sorrow, of Helen and Edward, of the young doomed airman. The customers nudged each other, and winked. The drunkenness was billowing up into their skulls, almost visibly, like a smoke.

"Excuse *me*!" said Mr. Hardacre, barring egress from the alcove. "If you don't *mind*!" In his vast experience this sort of situation had presented itself before.

"Oh, all *right*!" cried Danny. He took his wallet out of his pocket, removed a few pound notes, and threw them down on the table. "Keep the change! Come, Stella!" He had her by the hand now. He was moving so fast he almost had her off her feet, too. "Isn't it fun!" he cried. They were out of the public-house now. "We'll make them livid!" Hand in hand they hared across the pavement, across the roadway, and out upon the green. There, beyond the green, was the car, and beyond the car, the house, rising between the bowers of trees. At that moment all the windows glinted, as a cloud slipped from the forehead of the setting sun.

"If we're not careful, they'll see us!" It was almost as if he thought they'd hear him, too, unless he dropped his voice to a whisper. "We'd better come up very carefully! Come back here, Stella, quick!" He pulled her up some twenty or thirty yards to the left. "Now that big chestnut tree's between us and the windows. See?"

"Yes," she whispered.

They crept forward, still hand in hand, like a couple of children, intensely serious, their seriousness the measure of their intense excitement. Mr. Hardacre neglected to finish his black-out. He stood at the window, staring. Other customers were clustered in the doorway.

"Well, I never!" said one. "Would you believe it? Cock-eyed!"

"That *is* that Mr. Mather?" asked another. "Old Miss Letford's nephew?"

"You wouldn't have thought," declared another, who also recognized him, "you wouldn't have thought he was one to carry on like that! Where's his wife, I wonder? He *is* married, isn't he?"

"Didn't you hear? Missing! With his kid, too. Out in Malaya!"

"She's a tasty bit of goods, I must say! Look at 'em! Playing cowboys and Indians now! Having the time of their lives!"

"Well, why not? Here to-day, gone to-morrow, *I* say!"

"Keep low!" Danny whispered. "That's right! It's like out here! I mean out in the jungle, stalking the Japs, and the Japs stalking you!"

"But you never told me!" she said. "You *must* tell me! How did you get away, after all?"

"Hush! Not so loud! One of our destroyers picked us up." He flicked the words off his mouth, as you might flick dust off your sleeve. "Just a few more yards now!" The tree-trunk still had them hidden from the windows of The Hazels. "Now!" he cried. "Quick! Let's make a rush for it!"

With a loud halloo from him, a sharp giggle from her, they broke cover. They raced across the roadway, to the off window of the parked car. He seized the handle of the right-hand door. It was locked. "Hell!" he cried "Round the other way!" He tore round the tail of the car to the other door. This one was open. He got in and pulled her in after him. "Move up!" he shouted. Just as if someone were already seated in the car. But there wasn't, of course. He was just lit up, absolutely on top of the world. He took the Austin ignition-key out of his pocket, the ignition-key he had not thrown away in Singapore. It came in very useful now. He inserted it, switched the engine on, pressed the starter.

"Danny!" a voice cried, from far over on the left, across the surge of his pounding pulses. "Danny! Listen! Danny!" It

was his mother's voice. She must have sighted him from the sitting-room. She had had time to rush out to the front door. He turned his head. She was under the built-on portico. She was waving at him frantically. Her face was bright red. She was in an awful stew. Tough luck! Couldn't be helped!

"See you later, mum!" he called out to her. "At the station! Last train! Awfully busy now! So long!"

She raced down the steps and was running down the gravel drive.

"Danny!" she shouted. "Listen, there's news——" Her words were drowned as he pressed the accelerator and raced the engine. He got into gear and plunged off, the car leaping like a bucking horse.

"God!" he cried, "what a lark! Can you imagine old Susan's face!" He got into second gear, third gear. The engine was full out now. He was racing along the road as if this were the Grand Prix at Monte Carlo. The tyres sang. His blood sang. It was wizard.

"Faster!" a voice said in his ear. "Faster!"

"O.K., Stella!" he said. "I think she's almost full out now!"

"I didn't say anything, dear!" she quivered.

"What's that?"

"I said I didn't say anything! Do go a bit carefully, won't you, dear?" She was tight, but she was frightened. Her heart was in her mouth.

"O.K.! O.K." He honked furiously at a military car that dared to be on the road the same time that he was. "Road-hog!" he shouted gleefully, as he took a curve of the road at fifty an hour. The car hung shuddering on two wheels for a moment or two, then came down on all fours again. "Isn't she a honey!" he cried exultantly.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

"You wicked old woman!" Those had been the words. "God damn you!"

You couldn't unsay words like that. There they were, as much there as if they were something made out of hard stone, cut into shape by a chisel. The silver tea-tray with the shining tea-things

lifted into the air and hurled upon the floor, with tinkle of fragile tea-cups, thunder of solid metal! You couldn't ever lift it up from the floor again, it would lie there for all time. Though to the outward eye it had suffered neither scratch nor abrasion, it lay there irreparable, like the broken Rockingham tea-cups green and white as lilies of the valley.

Somebody did lift the tray some considerable time later, really you could not say when, but they had lifted the tray's body, not its soul. The soul had gone out of it, shuddering. You could not say when the tray had been lifted. There had been other excitements about that same time, just before and after. But the bad words, the hurled tray, were graver events than those.

Was it fair to blame Danny for everything? Was it possible for you to deny that the unpleasantness was in some measure Susan's fault, too? Even if you were Mona or Edie, and throughout the whole of your life till now you could as soon have been critical of the stars, or the sun, or God, as be critical of Susan?

Really, Susan shouldn't have said all those things, with Danny in the room, too, and he had had such a dreadful time, poor boy. Those people in Malaya, she had said, they were a pack of snivelling cowards, the army, the civil service, the whole lot of them. That's why Malaya fell. They were a lot of "sissies". How could Susan, of all people in the world, use such a word? It was beyond belief.

It might be thought strange by some people. A bomb had come down quite close at hand, so close most of the windows had cracked, things had come down from tables, the floor was all flaked with plaster. But a bomb is only a bomb, after all. Some of us have had bombs fall closer than that. The bomb wasn't anywhere so upsetting as all this. It was *most* unfortunate, to say the least.

It was certainly much more than that to Angela Mather, Danny's mother. Her face was flushed deep-red, as if she had been drinking, which she had not been doing, of course. Her lower jaw was thrust forward unpleasantly. Not since her childhood had any of her sisters seen her look like that.

The minutes went by, minute upon minute. It was odious. It seemed necessary for someone to say *something*, but nobody would, or could. Perhaps Susan could have said something; the occasion had certainly never before been known in all her history when Susan could not say something if she wanted to. Doubtless she did not want to. She had been grossly insulted. Until somebody apologized very copiously indeed, she would not open those tight-shut lips.

Then at last the twins whimpered. One of the Pekinese could have made a noise like that, but in fact it was the twins. The tight-shut lips came unstuck.

"Stop whimpering!" bade Susan. Mona and Edie stopped whimpering. Instead, they recited inside themselves the virtues of

their favourite saints. Nobody could stop them doing that, anyway.

The long, long minutes went by. Bertha would have given a king's ransom for a cigarette. In moments of tension she would sometimes lock herself up in the box-room and indulge in a secret cigarette. But it was out of the question now. They would all smell it in her clothes and hair when she came back. She would have to do without it now and get more and more irritable.

It was Lavinia who broke the silence. She had known from the beginning it would fall to her sooner or later. She addressed Angela.

"Angela, dear," she said. "Do you see? He's left his attaché-case behind." She pointed it out where it stood against Bertha's black oak desk.

Angela looked where she pointed.

"So he has," she said dully. She was thinking about young Edward for the moment. He was the joy and pride of her life. Then the picture came into her mind of the way Danny had held on to that attaché-case . . . almost as if it were young Edward himself, she thought suddenly. "So he has," she repeated. By this time her voice was tremulous with distress. "He's awfully attached to that case. He must have brought it all the way over with him."

"It's been in the water with him, too," said Lavinia. "I'm certain."

"So he was torpedoed, as well," his mother said miserably. "What the poor boy's been through!" He must have been aching to get things off his chest, and he had been treated like a travelling vacuum salesman. She felt frightened.

"If you'll excuse my saying so, ma'am, it's because of that photograph."

Everybody turned, excepting Susan, who was apparently not interested. It was Martha talking, who could often be in a room doing her chores without anyone noticing she was there. It was obviously Martha who had lifted the tray and tidied up. She was working at the carpet now, where the jam had fallen, with soap and hot water. Useful Martha. Kitchen-maid, parlour-maid, nurse-maid; everything-maid.

"I wish you wouldn't chatter so when I have a headache," said Bertha. It was the first that had been heard of that headache.

"Beg your pardon, Miss Letford!" muttered Martha.

"*What* photograph?" insisted Angela.

"He told me—in the kitchen," Martha explained apologetically. "There was a wallet in his attatchy-case, and it had a photograph of poor dear Mrs. Helen and Master Edward. So the attatchy-case has been with him everywhere, wherever he's been."

"I see," Angela murmured. "Thank you, Martha." So that was where the poor lad had been forced to go to get things off his

chest. To the kitchen. To the kitchen-maid. She felt she could slap herself in the face.

Martha was rubbing away as silently as she knew how at the jam-tangled hair of the carpet. The last thing she wanted to do was to aggravate Miss Letford's headache.

Lavinia rose from her chair.

"He gave me the impression," she said, "he feels completely lost without that attaché-case. No wonder. I think I'll take it over to him. Would you like me to, Angela?"

Mona suspended her litany. Edie stopped blowing her nose. Bertha laid down her smelling-salts. All looked up incredulously. Did Lavinia know what she was saying; where, so simply and quietly, she proposed to go? Susan did not look up. The conversation did not interest her. She had taken a pack of cards and was arranging them on the small table beside her. She proposed to have a game of patience with herself.

Angela looked really pathetic. If anybody ought to take her son's case, obviously she ought. But it meant going to a public-house. She had entered a public-house not more than once or twice in her life, and then for very sufficient reasons. And this public-house wasn't an ordinary one. It was the Barleycorn. The existence of the Barleycorn had generally been accepted as a deliberate insult to The Hazels.

"Of course . . . naturally . . . I'll take it," she murmured. She clearly didn't relish the idea. She did not get up from her chair.

"Don't worry," decided Lavinia. "I'd like a breath of fresh air. I'll go along."

Then Bertha raised her voice, so peremptorily that even Susan looked up.

"You will not!" proclaimed Bertha. "If you *don't* mind! I will have no one going over from this house to that place!" It might well have been a brothel from the way she spoke. She looked not merely irritated, but extremely angry. It wasn't the cigarette she had been prevented from having. It wasn't the broken cups and saucers and the jammy messes in the carpet. It was the whole beastly day. Everything had gone wrong. She had worked herself to the bone and this was the way they treated her. Her large lips quivered. She was on the brink of tears.

But Lavinia didn't like to be talked to like that. She was, after all, very much a senior sister. The pince-nez glittered as she turned her head sharp round.

"I really don't see what you're making all that fuss about, Bertha," she said. "How ridiculously old-fashioned you are! I don't suppose I could count the number of times I've been into a public-house with Arthur." (Her husband had been Arthur.) "Do I look any the worse for it?" She went over, picked up the attaché-case, and moved towards the door.

But Bertha was there before her.

"No, Lavinia," she proclaimed, spreading out her arms. "I will not have it!" A tear trembled in her eye. Her enormous bosom heaved. "I will not have people going over from here to that place all day long! I will not have it!"

"But, my dear," protested Lavinia, "aren't you exaggerating a little?" Temper with Lavinia never lasted more than a few seconds, if it happened at all. She was a pacific soul.

"Exaggerating or not, anybody who goes to that place doesn't come back here!"

Lavinia shrugged her shoulders.

"It's all too silly!" she said. She wasn't going to get involved in a row about it. "But the poor boy will want his bag," she pointed out.

"If he comes for it, it will be given to him at the door," said Bertha.

It was Angela's turn now.

"Oh, indeed," she cried, rising from her chair. "I will not have my son treated this way. I think you've forgotten. I think we've all forgotten. He's just arrived after a journey of thousands and thousands of miles. He's torn to pieces with anxiety. We've all behaved perfectly disgracefully!"

Bertha set her jaw. "I will not have anybody coming into my house dead drunk. It is, after all, a Ladies' Guest House. We have a reputation to keep up. I'm sorry, Angela!" She shook her head violently.

"Oh, sit down all of you!" barked Susan. "Like a lot of schoolgirls!"

The habit of obedience, ingrained in all her sisters over many years, was too much for them. They sat down.

There was no conversation, for you could not call conversation the ridiculous remarks that Bertha addressed from time to time to the four Pekinese, in whom she now proceeded to take refuge. There was a more definite sense of funeral about the proceedings than there had been during the whole of that regrettable day. The corpse seemed not fifty years old, but quite contemporary, there in the room with them. There was not one of the five visiting sisters who would not have been heartily pleased to rise from her chair, pack up her bag, and go off. But where was there to go to? Ladies of that age cannot vaguely wander, bag in hand, around the streets of the village they were born in. It is hateful to wait about in stations for trains. Everything was altogether too silly and too humiliating.

The unpleasantness continued. Lavinia was lucky. She had her work-bag with her. She took out her knitting and got on with it. Bertha rose and mumbled something about Dr. Charman. It was Dr. Charman's evening, and she had better get Miss Stanmore ready. Lavinia asked pleasantly wasn't Dr. Charman dead yet.

Bertha looked offended. It was always bad taste to suggest anyone connected with The Hazels could die. She walked out. Angela picked up a paper and read a brief paragraph about a party of people, including some women and children, who had been taken off an island somewhere by a Dutch submarine, and had been landed in an Australian port. It occurred to her that that paragraph might interest Danny. She wondered if he had seen it. Perhaps she ought to go over and tell him about it. Then she thought better of it. It would only start all that awfulness again, and in any case it mightn't be a clever thing to do from Danny's point of view. It could only set the poor boy off again . . . when he was perhaps forgetting his worries over there for a few minutes.

"Would anybody mind," quivered the voice of Edie, "if we had the wireless on?"

"I don't see why people want to be listening to those hideous crooners all day long," observed Susan. It was obvious Susan disliked the idea of having the wireless on. Edie, who had had no intention of listening to crooners, picked up a knitting magazine. Angela found a book. Susan worked out her game of patience, and set the cards out again.

Angela could not read.

"I wonder if he'll come over himself," she was thinking. "Oh, no, I'm sure he wouldn't, not while *she's* about. Do you think he's worrying about his bag? No, I don't think so. He knows I'll bring it to the station for that last train. I do wish it was time to make tracks."

The minutes passed. Lavinia's needles clicked. The clock clanged on the black oak desk. The dogs were taken out for a run, there was an excited yapping, a fertile silence, the dogs were brought back again. The minutes passed. It was getting rather a strain to read. It must be nearly black-out time. Probably Martha would be coming in any moment now. . . .

Martha, in fact, came in. At that moment the sound of an approaching car was heard. The car slowed down and stopped outside the gate. Lavinia, Angela, Mona, Edie, looked up.

"That must be the old doctor," murmured Lavinia. "Fancy, he's still around." You would have thought she was a girl of twenty.

"They've got all the young ones with the forces," said Angela.

They heard the slamming of the car door.

"I'd better go along and open for him," mumbled Martha.

They heard the sound of his feet approaching along the gravel drive.

At that moment the telephone-bell rang. You could hear it quite clearly from down the hall near Miss Potts's room. A moment later Dr. Charman was at the front door. The door-bell rang.

"What excitement!" murmured Lavinia, her needles clicking peacefully.

"We've had excitement enough!" ventured Angela. "It's been a very trying day."

"You needn't have come!" broke out Susan sharply. "We could have got on without you!"

"Oh, my dear Susan," Angela expostulated. She was quite hurt. "You shouldn't talk like that!"

There were voices everywhere all of a sudden, Martha and Dr. Charman saying something to each other at the front door, Bertha calling out something from the door of Miss Stanmore's room, and Miss Potts's voice, louder and more piercing than the others, answering the telephone.

"Yes," she was saying, "yes. This is Westerleigh four two. Yes?" There was a little delay, then further confirmation.

"It sounds like a trunk call," said Angela a little uneasily. "I wonder if Mr. Arbuthnot wants me?"

"What would he ring up at this time for?" said Lavinia.

Miss Potts entered the room.

"It's for you . . . Mrs. Mather," announced Miss Potts. "Your air-raid warden wants to talk you. Mrs. Wingate, I think she said." There was a note of malicious satisfaction in her voice, as if somebody had left a light burning all night long in an unblacked-out room, and somebody was for it.

"Yes," said Angela faintly, and rose, and went out.

She took up the receiver.

"Is that you, Mrs. Wingate? Mrs. Mather here. Yes?" her heart was knocking apprehensively.

"Oh, Mrs. Mather! I'm so sorry to trouble you. But I've got good news for you! I knew you wouldn't mind!"

"Mrs. Wingate! News from Helen? My daughter-in-law? And the boy? Oh, Mrs. Wingate!" She thought she would faint. "Are they all right?"

"Yes, they're all right. There's a cable from her. They brought it over from your house this evening, but I've been out. Shall I read it to you?"

"Please!" It felt as if all her face was on fire.

"'*Both well*,'" Mrs. Wingate read. "'*Saved by Dutch submarine from desert island including guest clock enormous fun stop is Danny well also where.*' She gives the address of a bank in Darwin," Mrs. Wingate continued. "I can't tell you how happy I am. Please tell your son. I won't keep you now. Good night, Mrs. Mather."

"Thank you," whispered Angela. "Good night, Mrs. Wingate." Both telephones were replaced on their rests. A moment later Angela Mather was shouting at the top of her voice: "Thank you, Mrs. Wingate! Thank you, Mrs. Wingate!" They heard her all over the house. She sounded as if she had gone mad. She ran down the hall, she flung open the sitting-room door. "Lavinia!" she shouted. "Mona! Everybody! A cable from Helen! They're all right! They're all right!"

Lavinia and Mona and Edie were already standing up. Susan was still seated. "Oh, darling, darling!" cried Lavinia, and flung her arms round her sister's neck. "Isn't it marvellous! Where are they? How did they get away?"

Mona was waiting her turn.

"Thank God!" said Mona, just a little primly, as if she wasn't surprised, really. "I *knew* they were all right!" "I *knew* they were all right," repeated Edie. There was another bout of sisterly kissing.

"I'm very pleased!" said Susan. That wasn't bad for her.

"We'll all go over to the Barleycorn!" cried Lavinia, "and tell him!" She clapped her hands. She was positively dancing.

"Yes, yes!" cried Angela. Tears were rolling down her face. "Come, darling!"

"I'll come, too!" proclaimed Mona loudly, in a tone of one burning many boats. "Me too!" shouted Edie.

"One moment!" exclaimed Susan. "Look! You'll have to be quick!"

She pointed through the window. What happened outside there happened very quickly. There was a vision of a flushed Danny, pulling along a flushed blonde by the hand. He was at the offside of Dr. Charman's car, trying to open the door. The door was evidently locked. He was running round the tail end of the car, still pulling the blonde along, the blonde giggling and screaming.

His mother did not wait for more than that. She fled out of the sitting-room, moving quicker than she had moved for many years. She was down the hall, she had flung the front door open.

Danny was in the car, in the driving-seat. The blonde was in beside him. He was fumbling over the dash-board.

"Danny!" she cried. "Danny! Listen! Danny!"

He had already switched the engine on. The engine was turning over. He had heard her. He turned his head.

"See you later, mum!" he called out. "At the station. Last train!" The rest was drowned in the swelling roar of the engine.

She raced down the steps and along the gravel drive.

"Danny!" she shouted. "There's news from Helen! Da-a-anny!" she wailed. He did not hear her. He was gone.

II

"Come along, my dear, come!"

It was the voice of Lavinia behind her ear. It was the arms of Lavinia about her waist. She certainly would have fallen to the ground jf Lavinia had not been there to hold her up. She felt as weak at the knees as if she had just got out of bed after a month's illness.

"Steady, darling, there now!"

They were back at the front door, back in the sitting-room again.

"There now, dear, sit down, won't you?" murmured Lavinia. "You mustn't worry so. Mona dear, will you please ask Bertha if she has a drop of brandy? Boys will be boys, Angela. One mustn't grudge them a bit of fun, you know." She knew she was talking nonsense, but anything would do. Anything would do until some colour came back into Angela's cheeks, and the fear went out of her eyes.

If it should ever go out of her eyes again. And the fear was not only in Angela's eyes. It was in the twins', too. She was glad she, Lavinia, wore these pince-nez which you couldn't see through from the other side. But she knew that the fear was in her heart, knocking, knocking.

"Yes," breathed Mona faintly. "I'll ask Bertha for a drop of brandy." She looked as pale as Angela. So did Edie. It was clear they remembered vividly, though they were only ten years old at the time, and that was fifty years ago. But you remember things that happen when you're ten far more vividly than the things that happen years later.

Susan said nothing for a minute or two. She did not seem to have risen from her chair. She must have witnessed everything through the window.

Then: "Chafe her hands!" said Susan. "Angela's hands would always go cold."

"Yes," whispered Lavinia, and chafed Angela's hands. "It'll be all right, Angela," she said again. "Just a bit of a joy-ride."

Yes, of course. A bit of a joy-ride. It had been exactly like that fifty years ago that night.

"Of course," said Angela. "Besides, he'll be at the station for that last train. I wonder if I ought to be moving on." She looked at the clock.

"No, dear," jnsisted Lavinia. "You must take things quietly for a few minutes. I know what an upset it was! But I'm sure—— Oh, here's the brandy!"

Yes, here was Mona, with a half-bottle of Martel and a liqueur-glass. She handed them over to Lavinia, who was more expert in everything.

"I told Bertha," Mona said. "And Dr. Charman, of course."

"Was he furious?" asked Angela.

"No," said Mona. "He looked more nervous than anything. He should have done something to the car, he said, but he'd grown slack about it. After all, here in his own village . . ."

"Of course," Angela breathed. "He should have done something to the car."

"Do take a drop of this, dear," insisted Lavinia.

"My dear, I'm perfectly all right. You know I loathe the stuff."

"Please do! It was very smart of Danny noticing he hadn't turned off the car! There now! Is that better?"

Angela coughed.

"Beastly!" she said. "Do sit down, Lavinia dear! I think I'll go and apologize to Dr. Charman. It's not a bit like Danny, you know it isn't." She was about to get up, when the door opened, admitting first Bertha, then Dr. Charman.

"I think you all remember Dr. Charman!" said Bertha. Her jaw was very grim. Yes, they all remembered Dr. Charman. The years had abstracted a great many things from the old doctor, but not his bedside manner. He rubbed his hands helpfully.

"Good evening, ladies, good evening," he said. "Miss Mona's told me you're very upset, Mrs. Mather. Please, I beg you. Don't let it bother you. It was my fault. My fault entirely. I should have remembered to remove the distributor. I'll have to treat myself very severely. I'm a Justice of the Peace, you know, as well as a doctor. I'll have to give myself a good talking-to. Tee-hee!" He tittered, lifted aside the tails of his frock-coat, and looked around for a chair. "If you don't mind, ladies, I'll make myself comfortable. After all, I can't move off till the young man is good enough to bring my car back." He found his chair and planted himself down on it with precision. "Tee-hee!" He tittered again.

"It's awfully kind of you to take it in this spirit, Dr. Charman," murmured Angela. "I really am most grateful to you." Dr. Charman was very helpful, but he had missed the point. There was no reason to demonstrate it to him. "My son's behaved very badly indeed," she went on. "I apologize sincerely. He's been under great pressure. He's a good driver, and I'm quite certain he'll bring the car back as he found it. But, of course, if there should be any damage——"

She stopped. All her sisters looked round at her, then looked sharply away. Why should there be any damage? No reason in the world. Ridiculous!

"Of course not!" insisted the doctor. "Please! I'm sure everything will be all right! Your son was naturally delighted to hear the good news about his wife and child! I would have done the same thing myself at his age. Tee-hee!"

The old gentleman had got hold of the wrong end of the stick, one way and another. It didn't matter much. It was helpful he was taking it all so nicely. He chattered away, about the war, and the Americans, and his lupins, and this and that. He knew that everyone was in a state of strain and suspense, above all the mother, of course. He reverted to the other mother, the mother of the six women there assembled, whose funeral anniversary they had come to commemorate. He regretted he had not had the honour of her acquaintance. She must have been a great lady, he was certain of that; they don't make them like that any more. "Not often!" he said, with the shadow of a bow towards Susan. He was very

tactful. He was one of the very special amenities of residence at The Hazels. No wonder all the ladies adored him.

They were quite a company there, Susan and Lavinia, Angela and Bertha, Mona and Edie, and Dr. Charman. Miss Potts was there, too. She was always on hand when Dr. Charman was about. She confirmed the professional note. Susan, Lavinia, Angela, Bertha, Mona, Edie, Dr. Charman, Miss Potts.

Yet somehow that was not all the roster. A sense grew of some other person in their midst. They felt the sense of him at the back of their necks. They avoided each other's eyes. Dr. Charman went on chattering. No one took the least notice of him. It was that other man who demanded and received their notice. A gallant, a mocking, an odious, a drunken creature. Perpetually drunk. No wonder it caught up on him at last.

What was wrong with the dogs, all of them, tossing and whimpering in their sleep?

It had been a day endlessly drawn out, tedium upon tedium. This tedium was more forbidding, it was cadaverous. The voice of Dr. Charman was like the ticking of the death-watch beetle in the rafters.

". . . Although I am quite prepared to believe that the cleansing of the soul has its therapeutic value, too, if I may put it so. But when you find young ladies and gentlemen of seventeen getting on their hind feet in a crowded drawing-room and confessing to sins which, believe me, they are more likely to want to commit than to have committed . . . do I make myself plain? Do I?"

He paused a moment as if awaiting an answer. None of the ladies present had an answer to give him. There was a further silence, as it were, a rhetorical silence for several seconds. . . .

Then the telephone-bell rang, loud and clear and cold.

"I beg your pardon!" said Dr. Charman, as if indeed an answer had been ventured, but he had not quite got the point of it.

"The telephone!" said Bertha. "Will you please answer it, Miss Potts?"

But Miss Potts had already risen, and was on her way out of the room.

No one said a word. The telephone-bell went on ringing, with that queer clear tone, as if the atmosphere was rarer than it had been all day long. Then it stopped.

"Westerleigh four two," announced Miss Potts. "This is The Hazels." She had left the door open. You could hear every word.

"Yes? Oh, yes? Mr. Leslie? Yes?

"*What?* Are you sure, Mr. Leslie? Oh, no! Oh, *please*!"

There was silence at The Hazels end for some time, interrupted only by a loud intake of breath two or three times.

Then Miss Potts spoke again. Her voice was vibrant, masterly.

"Yes, that would be the best thing. Yes, Dr. Charman is still

here." Her speech was not interrupted by its usual nervous catches. "How long do you think it will take you before you can get them here? Very well, Mr. Leslie. Thank you."

She replaced the receiver, turned away, and strode along the passage. She was in her own world, woe and disaster. Before she had gone four steps, Lavinia had issued from the sitting-room, closed the door behind her, and was at her side.

"What's happened? Tell me quick! Can't you speak?"

Miss Potts's face was almost as flushed as the scraggy shock of terra-cotta hair. The hairs arranged about her warts seemed sensitive and individual, like antennæ.

"There's been an accident just outside Mr. Leslie's, at Faleham Cross! The car turned over. He's unconscious. The woman got out all right. She told them."

"Does he say . . . he's bad?"

"He's very bad, he said. We'll have to get things ready. I'm going to get some sheets." Her eyes glittered. It had been a great many years since a male had died at The Hazels; not, in fact, since young Mr. Sims had died at sunset in Miss Letford's arms.

III

Lavinia came back into the sitting-room.

They were waiting, her five sisters, and the doctor, and that other one. The doctor was on his feet.

"Is he dead?" asked Danny's mother.

"No, darling, no," replied Lavinia. "He's unconscious. The car turned over." It occurred to her that perhaps it might not be desperately bad, seeing the woman was all right. She said exactly that.

"Come, come, Mrs. Mather," requested Dr. Charman briskly. "It won't do to jump to conclusions. It may be just concussion, that and nothing more. Awfully lucky, I must say. A doctor on the spot, I mean," he added quickly. Even he was a little embarrassed by such ineptness.

The women were not listening to him. He might have been ten miles away. There was a twofold picture in their minds, one superimposed upon the other, and the older, for some mysterious reason, was the more vivid. The older picture was of the older man; of their father, in fact, Danny's grandfather.

He, too, had gone out at the end of the day, that day fifty years ago on which they had buried their mother—the day he, too, like his grandson, had shattered into fragments. Somewhere in the stews of the village he had picked up a loose woman, and they had got uproariously drunk. Then he had put his hands on a gig somehow, and they had gone roaring across the countryside, with a great hallooing and a cracking of the whip. The horse had shied

and galloped off, the bit between its teeth. The gig had turned over, and he had been pitched out upon his skull. He had been brought back to The Hazels dying.

The implicit doom of the day was made explicit, a comic doom, you might say. A few other people had to suffer from it, but you could not deny the joke was on Susan. You could almost hear him cackling over against the fireplace, where he used to stand, his coat-tails parted, warming the seat of his trousers.

No. No one had taken any notice of Dr. Charman for what seemed to him a long time.

"Hum!" he coughed. "We must pull ourselves together! It would be as well not to take him upstairs until we've had a look at him. Is there a room available on this floor?"

"He'll have mine," proclaimed Miss Potts. "It might be necessary to put up the woman, too." She would enjoy that almost as much.

"Where are we going to put her?" wailed Bertha. "The house is chock-full."

"I think we'll manage," said Lavinia.

"I'm ready to give up my bed," said Susan. Her voice had lost all the timbre it had had for the greater part of a century. It was small and thin and far-off, like a bat's.

"That won't be necessary," proclaimed Miss Potts. "You and Miss Mona can turn in together." Miss Potts had everything in hand. Edie kicked. She was not sleepable with

IV

They got the woman out of the way in one of the upstairs rooms. She was suffering from shock, she was bruised, but she would be all right. They gave her a sedative, and she was off before long.

Danny was unconscious when they brought him in, and he remained so for many hours. It was possible that there was a fracture of the skull, but that could not be known without an X-ray examination. There was no hæmorrhage.

When he regained consciousness, he thought for a time that he was still in the small boat away in the Indian Ocean, with Milligan dead out, and Jarvis and Higgins lying anyway over the gunwale, and Irwin mumbling and muttering to himself.

"Jarvis," he murmured. His voice was very faint indeed. "Can you hear me, Jarvis?"

He became conscious of a soft hand upon his hand. It was not Jarvis's hand. He became conscious of the rim of a glass at his lips.

"Take a drop of this, darling," he heard. "It will do you good. It's me, darling. It's mother."

The movement was not the rocking of a boat. It was not outside, but inside, his head. Then, with a thrust of pain through his skull like the plunge of a needle, complete awareness took possession of him.

"Hello, mother," he said. "A bit of an idiot, aren't I?"

"My poor dear boy," she breathed. Tears came at long last into her eyes. "It could happen to anybody."

"Mother!"

"Yes, dear!"

"Is the old attaché-case here?"

"Yes, darling. It's at the foot of the bed beside you. The wallet with the photographs is just here." She lifted it from the bedside table and placed it in his hands.

"What a pet you are!" He passed his finger-tips over the mica surfaces. "If ever they turn up," he said, "you'll give them my love?"

"Danny! I want you to be good now! Danny! I have grand news for you!"

"Yes, mother, yes?"

"We have a cable from them. They're all right. They're in Port Darwin!"

"Oh, mother, is that true?"

"It's true, Danny!"

"Honest?"

"Honest!"

He was quiet while he savoured the joy that seeped into all the parched channels of his heart, till they brimmed and overflowed.

"I knew she'd make it!" he said proudly. "She's got guts. Have you any idea——"

"Danny darling, I've got orders. I'll tell you more later. I mustn't let you talk too much. You must conserve your strength."

"I shouldn't worry about that, darling! I shan't need it!"

"Danny!" she implored him.

"I'm a bit of an old crock, anyway! I've not had time to tell you about the old bugs. Edward will carry on for me. Sound as a pippin, that young man. I think he'll make a better job of it."

"I want you to rest now, darling. You must rest."

"Is he wild?" he asked suddenly.

"Who, darling? Oh, the old doctor. It's all right, Danny dear! Will you rest now, darling?"

He did not answer her. His mind had gone away from her again. He was in a boat, rocking, rocking; but not in the Indian Ocean now, with the sun a pillar of fire standing between the sky and the sea. He was on Derwentwater, the year after he and Helen got married, but Edward was not there yet. They were under the lee of Friar's Crag, paddling their hands in the cool water. A school of fish darted under the boat's keel. The swallows were kicking up an awful fuss as they skimmed and darted over the brambles.

"Look!" he cried. "Do you see the goldfinches there? Among the cornflowers?"

"It's lovely," Helen shouted, and clapped her hands.

"I do wish you'd turn round, Mona!" Susan broke out suddenly. Mona could have sworn Susan was asleep. They had had to turn in together. There was no help for it, however much Susan disliked sharing her bed with someone else. That was how Miss Potts had arranged it.

Mona turned round.

"Oh, and stop snivelling!" Susan said. "My nightgown's wringing wet!"

"Yes, Susan," wept Mona, and started off again. Then she stopped. It was strange. It was frightening. It was like an ice-cold finger placed on her spine.

So it had been, exactly so, that night after that day fifty years ago, Mona a child of ten, Susan a woman of thirty-two. But Susan's words had been the same words.

"Oh, and stop snivelling!" Susan said. Half a century ago. "My nightgown's wringing wet!"

"Yes, Susan," wept Mona, and started off again.

THE END

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